Studies in the Early Middle Ages

Old English Heroic Poems and the Social Life of Texts

BREPOLS

John D. Niles

Old English Heroic Poems and the Social Life of Texts

STUDIES IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

Editorial Board under the auspices of the
Centre for Medieval Studies, University of York

Elizabeth M. Tyler (University of York)
Julian D. Richards (University of York)
Ross Balzaretti (University of Nottingham)

VOLUME 20

Old English Heroic Poems and the Social Life of Texts

by

John D. Niles

BREPOLS

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Niles, John D.
Old English heroic poems and the social life of texts. – (Studies in the early Middle Ages ; 20)
1. Epic poetry, English (Old) – History and criticism 2. Literature and society – England – History – To 1500 3. Heroes in literature 4. England – Social life and customs – To 1066
I. Title
829.1'009355

ISBN-13: 9782503520803

© 2007, Brepols Publishers n.v., Turnhout, Belgium

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

D/2007/0095/31
ISBN: 978-2-503-52080-3

Printed in the E.U. on acid-free paper

‘Since when’, he asked,
‘Are the first line and last line of any poem
Where the poem begins and ends?’
—Seamus Heaney, ‘The Fragment’, from *Electric Light* (2001)

‘If I am to tell you what my story means’, she said,
‘I must tell it again.’
—Zulu storyteller speaking to Harold Scheub,
from his book *The Tongue Is Fire* (1996), p. xviii.

Contents

Acknowledgements ix

List of Abbreviations xi

List of Illustrations xiv

Introduction: Myths and Texts 1

Chapter 1. Locating *Beowulf* in Literary History 13

Footnote: Recent Work on Mythmaking and Ethnogenesis, with Some Thoughts on the Normative 59

Query: How Real Are the Geats? And Why Does this English Poem Never Mention the English? 65

Chapter 2. *Widsith*, the Goths, and the Anthropology of the Past 73

Footnote: Some New Interest in the Goths 111

Chapter 3. Anglo-Saxon Heroic Geography: How (on Earth) Can It Be Mapped? 119

Chapter 4. The Myth of the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet 141

Excursus: The Refrain in *Deor* 189

Footnote: Calling a Bard a Bard, or Not 195

Response: The 'Battle of the Heroic Lay' Rejoined, or Not 199

Chapter 5. *Maldon* and Mythopoesis 203

Response: On Stylized Numbers, Odda's Name, and Propaganda 237

Excursus: On Sacrifice and Atonement 243

Chapter 6. Byrhtnoth's Laughter and the Poetics of Gesture 253

Footnote: Another Look at Byrhtnoth's Laughter 277

Chapter 7. True Stories and Other Lies 279

Chapter 8. Bede's Cædmon, 'The Man Who Had No Story' (Irish Tale-Type 2412B) 309

Chapter 9. Heaney's *Beowulf* Six Years Later 325

Afterword 355

Index of Modern Scholars Cited 357

General Index 365

Acknowledgements

Versions of a number of the essays included here have appeared elsewhere and are reprinted with the permission of the publishers. 'Locating *Beowulf* in Literary History' appeared in *Exemplaria*, 5 (1993), 79–109. '*Widsith*, the Goths, and the Anthropology of the Past' appeared (with a slightly shorter title, without 'the Goths') in *PQ*, 78 (1999), 171–213, as part of a collection of papers ed. by John M. Hill. 'The Myth of the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet' appeared in *Western Folklore*, 62 (2003), 7–61, as part of a special double issue ed. by Joseph Falaky Nagy. '*Maldon* and Mythopoesis' appeared in *Mediaevalia*, 17 (1994 for 1991), 89–121, as part of a special set of papers, ed. by myself, titled 'History into Literature: Ideology, Values, and the Shaping of History in Narratives Relating to Tenth- and Eleventh-Century England'. 'Byrhtnoth's Laughter and the Poetics of Gesture' is reprinted by permission of Boydell and Brewer Ltd from *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. by Jonathan Wilcox (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 11–32. 'True Stories and Other Lies' is included in the volume *Myth in Early Northwest Europe*, ed. by Stephen O. Glosecki (Tempe, forthcoming). 'Bede's Cædmon, "The Man Who Had No Story" (Irish Tale-Type 2412B)' appeared in *Folklore*, 117 (2006), 141–55.

Financial support from the Graduate School of the University of Wisconsin, Madison through income provided by the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation (WARF), and from the UW–Madison Department of English (in the form of the Nancy C. Hoefs Professorship) enabled me to develop new work for this volume, and an appointment as Senior Fellow at the Institute for Research in the Humanities at UW–Madison allowed me to bring it to completion in the fall of 2005. Support from the Committee on Research at the University of California, Berkeley, facilitated previous research. I am grateful to Clare Hall, Cambridge, for having named me a Visiting Fellow during the 1997–98 academic year, for that

appointment allowed me to pursue my research in a sustained manner in a collegial setting.

Members of the staff of the British Library and Exeter Cathedral Library provided photographs for Figures 1 and 2, respectively, and granted permission to publish them. The facsimile page from the Exeter Book is included by permission of the Dean and Chapter of Exeter Cathedral.

It is impossible to offer thanks to the many persons who have stimulated my thoughts or helped me with specific questions and problems over the period during which I have worked on these chapters. I have a particular debt of gratitude to Martin K. Foys for providing me access to a colour digitized facsimile of the Cotton Tiberius map, together with his transcriptions of the names on it. Other persons are cited by name at appropriate points, and I am grateful to them all for their collegial interest and support. I am also indebted to the editors and the editorial assistants who have helped me improve some of these essays, as well as to the specialist readers who have critiqued them. Brian O'Camb, my project assistant at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, provided invaluable help with this volume as with a previous one published in this series. Chelsea Avirett helped with the indexes, and Elizabeth Fine was a model of patience while drafting the map on p. 137. An anonymous reader for Brepols offered much sage advice, for which I am grateful, and Deborah A. Oosterhouse provided expert editorial assistance while preparing the book for the Press.

I have a lasting debt to my children — Daniel, Margaret, Alan, and Emily — for tolerating their father's preoccupations when they might well have wished him to have had shorter dealings with things of no evident comfort in the world. This book is for them. 'There are more work days than life days', a friend remarked to me one pleasurable afternoon spent far away from books and papers, thus expressing the wisdom of people who would rather live or make stories than pore over them.

Abbreviations

Standard abbreviations not included in the following list are based on the *MHRA Style Book* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1996).

Anglo-Saxonism	*Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity*, ed. by Allen J. Frantzen and John D. Niles (Gainesville, 1997)
ASE	*Anglo-Saxon England*
ASPR	The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, ed. by George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, 6 vols (New York, 1931–53)
ASSAH	*Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*
BAR	British Archaeological Reports
A Beowulf Handbook	*A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. by Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Lincoln, 1997)
BJRL	*Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*
Blackwell Encyclopaedia	*The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Michael Lapidge and others (Oxford, 1999)
Bosworth and Toller, or B-T	James Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford, 1898), with *Supplement* by T. N. Toller (1921) and *Revised and Enlarged Addenda* by A. Campbell (1972)

Chambers, *Intro*.	R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem*, 3rd edn (Cambridge, 1959)
Colgrave and Mynors	*Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. by Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969)
Dobbie	*The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ed. by Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, ASPR, 6 (New York, 1942)
DOE	*Dictionary of Old English*, ed. by Antonette diPaolo Healey and others (Toronto, 1986–), letters A–F (on microfiche or CD-ROM)
EETS	Early English Text Society
EHD	*English Historical Documents*, vol. I: *c. 500–1042*, ed. by Dorothy Whitelock, 2nd edn (London, 1979)
ES	*English Studies*
Folklore: An Encyclopedia	*Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music, and Art*, ed. by Thomas A. Green, 2 vols (Santa Barbara, 1997)
Fulk and Cain	R. D. Fulk and Christopher M. Cain, *A History of Old English Literature* (Oxford, 2003)
Garmonsway and Simpson	*Beowulf and its Analogues*, trans. by G. N. Garmonsway and Jacqueline Simpson (London, 1968)
Homo Narrans	John D. Niles, *Homo Narrans: The Poetics and Anthropology of Oral Literature* (Philadelphia, 1999)
JEGP	*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*
Klaeber	*Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. by Fr. Klaeber, 3rd edn with 1st and 2nd supplements (Lexington, MA, 1950)
Krapp and Dobbie	*The Exeter Book*, ed. by George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, ASPR, 3 (New York, 1936)

Medieval England	*Medieval England: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by Paul E. Szarmach, M. Teresa Tavormina, and Joel T. Rosenthal (New York, 1998)
MLR	*Modern Language Review*
Neoph	*Neophilologus*
NM	*Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*
OE	Old English
OED	*The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1989)
the Old English Bede, or the OE Bede	*The Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. by Thomas Miller, EETS, 95, 96, 110, 111, published in two volumes (London, 1890–98)
the Old English Orosius, or the OE Orosius	*The Old English Orosius*, ed. by Janet Bately, EETS, SS, 6 (London, 1980)
ON	Old Norse (encompassing Old Icelandic)
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*
PQ	*Philological Quarterly*
Pulsiano and Treharne	*A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. by Phillip Pulsiano and Elaine Treharne (Oxford, 2001)
Settimane	*Settimane di studio del Centro Italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo*
SPh	*Studies in Philology*
TRHS	*Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*

Illustrations

p. 45 Figure 1. Ohthere's account of his travels in the region of Jutland. London, British Library, Cotton MSS, Tiberius B I, fol 13^{v} (detail).

p. 74 Figure 2. The beginning of *Widsith*. Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS 3501, fol. 84^{v}.

p. 118 Figure 3. 'Beowulf the Goth'. Frontispiece to *Beowulf: An Old English Epic*, trans. by Wentworth Huysche (London, 1907).

p. 137 Figure 4. Anglo-Saxon Heroic Geography.

Introduction

Myths and Texts

The present book develops the idea that all stories — all 'beautiful lies', if one considers them as such — have a potentially myth-like function as they are shaped by individual authors and as they enter and re-enter the stream of human consciousness at given moments in history.

In a different collection of papers published recently by Brepols,[1] I have directed attention to the ludic qualities of a number of short poems dating from the Anglo-Saxon period. The present volume directs attention to the myths that texts sometimes embody. More precisely, I examine a select number of Old English poems *as* myths, taking into account the contribution of poetry to the evolving consciousness of the Anglo-Saxons during an era of nation-building and ethnopoesis. Raising such questions as 'What is the mentality that finds literary expression here?' and 'How is literary meaning expressed through the language of image and gesture?', I venture into some territory extending between the disciplines of literary study and anthropology.

The large claim advanced in these chapters is that Old English verse can be of keen interest not only for the mental agility it demands on the part of its readers, but also for its ability to embody social thinking. Poetry, I argue, was the great collective medium through which the Anglo-Saxons conceived of their changing social world and made mental adjustments to it. To the extent that Anglo-Saxon poetry represented a response to contemporary issues and concerns, it took on a quasi-mythic aspect. Just as many scholars believe that true myths — that is, sacred narratives such as the biblical myth of the Fall — serve to charter a society's time-honoured beliefs, institutions, and values by means of a story set in the past,

[1] *Old English Enigmatic Poems and the Play of the Texts*, Studies in the Early Middle Ages, 13 (Turnhout, 2006).

I argue that similar functions were served by Anglo-Saxon verse, which was a profoundly social medium. Moreover, I suggest that the poems of this period not only bear witness to the intellectual life of their time; they also have had a significant afterlife in subsequent epochs, when they have continued to have a role in articulating peoples' conceptions of themselves as custodians of an ancient heritage.

For the most part, the poems taken into consideration pertain to the heroic traditions of the people of Britain during the earliest recorded period of English literature. Looking at *Beowulf* and *Widsith* in particular, I try to see what these archaic poems contributed to the collective thinking of the Anglo-Saxons during the turbulent period of the tenth century, when they are known to have been in circulation (regardless of when they were composed). In conjunction with that task, I also examine what concepts of 'heroic geography' are embodied in those works (in chapter 3). In the chapter on *Beowulf* I suggest that one of the primary functions of that poem was to provide the mixed population of Anglo-Scandinavian England with a distinguished ethnic past that represented a fusion of English and Danish heritages. I also suggest that the poem helped articulate a working system of values for the secular aristocracy through its fusion of Christian and heroic ideals. In the chapter on *Widsith* I show how that poem exploits the catalogue form, enriching it with a narrative that revives the heroic past and, specifically, the legendary history of the Goths in a manner that sheds honour on the English.

The next three chapters address themes of solidarity, heroism, and sacrifice against the backdrop of the waning years of the first millennium. In 'The Myth of the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet', I suggest that by cultivating the idea of the bard, the people of Anglo-Saxon England defined themselves, regardless of the actual circumstances in which they lived, as members of a tribe-like community knit by close personal bonds. Furthermore, I argue that the Anglo-Saxons cultivated the idea of tribal solidarity with even greater earnestness as the first millennium drew towards its close, in a period that was marked by an increasingly inept central authority and by the disintegration of reliable 'master to man' relations. Through a revisionist study of *The Battle of Maldon* in its historical context, I then attempt to show how the blistering social tensions of the second Viking Age, the era of Æthelred the Unready, were projected into the form of a highly spirited narrative that served the people of that time as a surrogate act of sacrifice and atonement. A second chapter on *Maldon* (chapter 6) addresses a moment of iconic gesture in that poem that epitomizes the heroic experience. This chapter, more than the others, addresses a problem in mentalities that is implicit throughout the book: namely, how can we be sure if our emotional and conceptual vocabulary corresponds to anything in the Anglo-Saxons' experience?

The last three chapters situate Old English studies within a broader world of humanistic letters. One of these, 'True Stories and Other Lies', calls attention to the key role of the spoken word in Anglo-Saxon society and characterizes storytelling in general as a fundamental human practice and, indeed, one that defines humanity as such. Here, in addition to commenting on one specific Anglo-Saxon social institution (the ordeal) that crucially relied on the sanctity of the spoken word, I develop more capaciously the twin concepts of 'narrative as myth' and 'truth clothed in lies' that figure in other parts of this book. Another chapter calls attention to Bede's skills as a mythmaker and storyteller, as well as his special devotional purposes, by demonstrating how closely his story of the historical Cædmon resembles a folktale type that is well attested in Ireland and Scotland in recent centuries. The final chapter, 'Heaney's *Beowulf* Six Years Later', discusses the afterlife of *Beowulf* in our own times with attention to a 'strong' translation of that poem that has aroused both admiration and resistance among its readers. These last chapters, taken together, are meant to confirm that Old English literature takes part in a large web of discourses spanning past and present, as does the study of that literature.

Taken as a whole, the book could be viewed not only as a close study of certain Old English texts but also as an Anglo-Saxonist's contribution to cultural studies, a field of inquiry whose happiness too often seems to depend upon the exclusion of evidence drawn from the remote periods of the past. There is a reason why, in these two volumes published by Brepols, I wish to promote the marriage of philology and cultural studies. This is that — like the husband and wife of two well-known elegiac poems from the Exeter Book — these two types of inquiry often exist in bleak isolation from one another. On the one hand, some cultural theorists almost flaunt their ability to evade the rigours of precise historical or philological analysis. On the other, some traditional philologists, taking inspiration perhaps from medieval models of resistance to sin, seem to take pride in their immunity to the taint of cultural theory. My own preferred manner of inquiry is to practise traditional philology with as much exactitude as I can muster while also pursuing ends that might be of interest to scholars in other disciplines, or to anyone interested in poetics, narrative, and the early medieval world. My aim is to show that the poetry of the Anglo-Saxon period, whether or not in a particular instance it is a brilliant aesthetic accomplishment, can shed light on the role of imaginative literature itself in shaping human consciousness.

The Scope of This Book

This book focuses on poetry that was taken down in writing during the late years of the tenth century, more or less (although some poems may have been composed

at an earlier date). The chief historical focus of the book is therefore the period from the reign of King Alfred the Great (871–99) to that of King Æthelred the Unready (978–1016). This was a period of emergent (though threatened) nationhood and of vigorous reform and consolidation in the Church. It was also a time when an effort seems to have been made to consolidate the literary records of England, such as they were at this time, into organized codices. At any rate, the four codices that contain the great bulk of the vernacular poetry that has come down to us (leaving aside the versified psalms and the metres of Boethius) were all written out round about the year AD 1000.

For the most part, prose falls outside the scope of the book. Latin sources, though always potentially relevant, also fall chiefly outside my present purposes. Exceptions to these principles are a chapter on Bede's account of the poet Cædmon and a short discussion of Æthelweard's Latin *Chronicon*, two sources with a special bearing on the emergence of written poetry in the vernacular and the rise of lay literacy, respectively.

The chief reason for this emphasis on vernacular poetry is my understanding that, while literacy in English was inseparable from literacy in Latin during this period, Latin verse remained a product of the schools and, in general, was dependent on Continental models. It did not tend so readily to be a vehicle for myth-making. Given how few persons were fully competent in Latin during any part of the Anglo-Saxon period, the poetry written in that language could not have been read with appreciation by nearly as many people as could have enjoyed verse composed in their native tongue. Old English verse was just as artful as was its Latin counterpart — indeed, some of it bears comparison with the most artful poetry of any time and place — but it was also a potential means of disseminating knowledge to large numbers of persons from various walks of life, including both the learned and the laity. Poetry in the vernacular was therefore an important medium of collective memory.

For similar reasons, works dating from the Anglo-Norman period receive only passing notice despite a surge of interest in the afterlife of Old English texts during that period of rich cultural hybridization involving French, Latin, English, Scandinavian, and Celtic sources.[2] Elsewhere I have written of the reception of elements of Anglo-Saxon literature (and, indeed, of the idea of Anglo-Saxon

[2] Symptomatic of that interest is the recent anthology *Old English in the Twelfth Century*, ed. by Mary Swan and Elaine M. Treharne (Cambridge, 2000), but many current studies are taking this direction. See further Elaine Treharne, 'English in the Post-Conquest Period', in Pulsiano and Treharne, pp. 403–15.

England itself) during the twelfth century and in later periods.[3] Here, for the sake of thematic unity, it has seemed best to concentrate on the time when Old English poetry was in full flower. Some incidental discussion of Anglo-Norman sources is included, all the same, in the chapters on '*Maldon* and Mythopoesis' and 'The Myth of the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet'.

The scope of the present book does encompass *Beowulf*, despite some hesitation I have had in that regard since I have written about that poem elsewhere.[4] Indeed, *Beowulf* is a poem that is hard for a literary Anglo-Saxonist to avoid, given how prominent a place that work has occupied in the modern reception of Old English poetry. There are several reasons for that poem's high profile. To begin with, the grand ceremonial style, expansive narrative art, and deeply meditative spirit of *Beowulf* distinguish that poem from other Old English verse of a less heightened kind. In addition, the very fact that modern specialists in Old English literature have devoted so much attention to *Beowulf* tends to keep that poem in the limelight, for it is a notorious truth that criticism feeds on criticism, sometimes to the exclusion of other game. Consideration of *Beowulf* is chiefly restricted to the first chapter of the book, the last chapter, and the chapter on 'Anglo-Saxon Heroic Geography'. To the first of these some ancillary sections have been appended that reflect my more recent thinking about that poem.

How This Book Is Organized, and What Has Been Done to its Contents

Two chapters have not appeared in print before. These are the ones on 'Anglo-Saxon Heroic Geography' and 'Heaney's *Beowulf* Six Years Later'. In addition, of course, the sections labelled 'Footnote', 'Query', 'Response', and 'Excursus' are new to this volume.

[3] 'The Wasteland of Loegria: Geoffrey of Monmouth's Reinvention of the Anglo-Saxon Past', in *Reinventing the Middle Ages and Renaissance: Constructions of the Medieval and Early Modern Periods*, ed. by William Gentrup (Turnhout, 1998), pp. 1–18. In addition, the co-authored essay 'Introduction: Anglo-Saxonism and Medievalism' by Allen J. Frantzen and myself, in *Anglo-Saxonism*, pp. 1–14, touches on the afterlife of Anglo-Saxon England in the thinking of later periods, as does my essay 'Appropriations: A Concept of Culture' included on pp. 202–28 of that volume.

[4] I refer chiefly to *Beowulf: The Poem and its Tradition* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), and my contributions to *A Beowulf Handbook*: 'Introduction: *Beowulf*, Truth, and Meaning' (pp. 1–12) and 'Chapter 11: Myth and History' (pp. 211–32). In addition, *Homo Narrans* includes revised versions of several of my articles on that poem.

The chapters have been unified into a single house style, including their system of citation. Some section headings and cross-references have been added and some redundancies eliminated. More than a few passages have been rephrased in the interest of greater precision or clarity, and here and there a point has been either expanded or presented more concisely. The essay on *Widsith*, for example, has been pruned somewhat (as well as being given a more informative title) so as to cast a stronger light on its main argument, which concerns the cultural work done by this poem in an England increasingly enamoured of the Goths. Some critical studies that have appeared in print subsequent to the publication of the earlier versions of these essays are cited, but my practice in this regard has not been a systematic one. Occasionally a study is cited that I had previously overlooked. For the benefit of non-specialist readers, some pointers to useful reference books published during the past eight years have been added, including *Medieval England: An Encyclopedia* (1998) and *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England* (1999). In one essay, '*Maldon* and Mythopoesis', I felt it important to introduce a new idea concerning charismatic leadership. In general, however, I have not wished to confuse readers or baffle reviewers by grafting new ideas into the texture of old essays, and so the chapters that have been published before remain essentially as they were, with such minor changes as have been noted.

Quotations of Old English poems with the exception of *Beowulf* are normally cited from the appropriate volume of ASPR. When a text is quoted from a different source, that fact is noted at that place. Citations of *Beowulf* are from Klaeber, minus the diacritics, except in the last chapter. Translations of Old English texts, as well as all other translations, are my own unless stated otherwise.

When words are discussed as words, vowel length is marked. In ordinary quotations, however, long vowels remain unmarked, since they are unmarked in most of my sources. When referring to the tribe customarily known in modern English as the 'Geats', I prefer to retain the spelling 'Gēatas', with both syllables preserved and with the long diphthong marked as such. This practice is intended to encourage readers to keep in mind the problematic nature of that tribe as, in large measure, a textual creation of the *Beowulf* poet.

For the sake of clarity of presentation, I have taken the liberty of normalizing the punctuation of prose texts when quoting them here. Such changes are restricted to capitalization, punctuation, and the use of abbreviations; and when editorial modifications of this kind have been made, that fact is stated at that point. The abbreviation 7 is silently expanded to *ond* 'and', in keeping with ASPR practice. Purists may cavil at these departures from typological practices followed in some modern scholarly editions of Old English prose, but in my own view,

standards of greater legibility in such editions are long overdue. Scholars with a professional interest in scribal minutiae may consult the digitized or microfiche facsimiles of medieval texts that are now becoming available in all major libraries.[5] As for verse texts, occasionally I quote parts of complete verse sentences without bothering to insert ellipses at the beginning and end of the quotation, but only where it makes no difference to the sense.

Coda: Humanistic Scholarship and the Flight from Meaning

It is a well-known paradox that scholarship in the humanities is often marked by a flight from humanistic methods and values. Anyone who has pursued an academic career during the past few decades will have witnessed this tendency.

In the early 1970s, when I was completing a doctoral programme in Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley, an urge to count the frequency of repeated phrases in texts that were thought to derive from oral tradition was characteristic of one scholarly movement in my field, and indeed I participated in that flight from meaning to some extent (though not in a mechanical way, I like to think). Various forms of structuralism too had their vogue, with their tendency to dehumanize texts by reducing them to their imagined skeletal forms, and for a time I received praise in some quarters for making a small contribution to that flight from meaning as well.[6] Psychological modes of criticism — or should I speak of psycho-sexual modes of criticism, for such they always seemed to be? — were greatly in vogue then in some circles, as they still are today, with their ominously threatening body parts and their tendency to translate features

[5] Note in particular the major collaborative project *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts in Microfiche Facsimile*, gen. ed. A. N. Doane, 12 volumes published to date (Binghamton and Tempe, 1994–).

[6] Praise was not forthcoming from all quarters, however. Bernard F. Huppé, writing in his book *The Hero in the Earthly City: A Reading of Beowulf* (Binghamton, 1984) with reference to my article 'Ring Composition and the Structure of *Beowulf*', *PMLA*, 94 (1979), 924–35, was less than enthusiastic in his assessment: 'Frequently perceptive, his essay appears to me to illustrate the impossibility of establishing the structure of the poem on purely narrative considerations, which remain inherently subjective' (at p. 90, n. 2). Writing now a quarter of a century later, I tend to agree with Huppé. His own analysis of the sectional divisions of the manuscript (at pp. 61–96) seems to me an approach to the structure of *Beowulf* that has the virtue of being grounded in objective features of the text as it has come down to us. All the same, I cannot share Huppé's perception that there is 'a clear, mathematically ordered structure which governs the poem' (p. 89). Moreover, the assessment of what constitutes an aesthetically coherent sectional division remains a subjective one.

of a literary work into a ready-made system whose validity depends more on leaps of faith than on the plodding steps of science.

In the meantime, old-school philology retained a tenacious hold upon the practices of many scholars of an older generation, some of whom looked upon 'literary criticism' in general (with its pursuit of meaning as embodied in a work's texture and tone) as a subversive activity akin to the robbing of banks. Their own favourite flight from meaning was often the collation of one manuscript reading against another — and another, and another. New Critics, meanwhile, plied their more stylish trade with panache and yet also, at times, with a disregard for rigorous philological analysis as well as a curious indifference to historical factors as determinants of meaning. Paradoxically, one of the most reductive methods of reading a literary text was the New Critical way, for the reader always knew what the end result of the analysis would be. To illustrate that point, here is a short passage from an article published in a prestigious academic journal in 1971:

> In brief, '————' is a unified poem of skillful structure and artistic design. The narrative conclusions and the emotional reflections of the speaker are interwoven into a complex but logical pattern, and the poem is notable for its stylistic sophistication.

In writing criticism of this kind, it seems, all one needed to do was to fill in the name of the text.[7]

Beginning not very long ago, electronic resources came increasingly to absorb the interest of scholars who saw in them the fulfilment of an age-old dream of a world-wide web of interconnected knowledge and subjectivity:

> Then there is electricity; — the demon, the angel, the mighty physical power, the all-pervading intelligence! [. . .] Is it a fact — or have I dreamt it — that, by means of electricity, the world of matter has become a great nerve, vibrating thousands of miles in a breathless point of time? Rather, the round globe is a vast head, a brain, instinct with intelligence!

Those words, of course, were not uttered by a scholar of my generation. Rather, they express the enthusiasm of a hypersensitive character — to be blunt, a somewhat deranged one — in a novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne published in 1851.[8] All

[7] In order to preserve the anonymity of this critic (who in the article to which mention is made has done nothing undeserving of praise), I will not say what the particular poem is that is found to be skilful, artistic, complex, and sophisticated, but it is one that is featured in my previous volume for Brepols.

[8] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, ed. by William Charvat, Roy Harvey Pearce, and Claude M. Simpson (Columbus, 1965), p. 264. The speaker is Clifford Pyncheon, fleeing from his cursed ancestral house in hopes of finding release from its oppressive atmosphere.

the same, the passage will illustrate my point that a certain amount of unsustainable optimism can characterize the effort to transcend the limits of ordinary knowledge by plugging a wire into an outlet or by logging onto Netscape. The question as to whether the inestimable benefit that computer resources have brought to researchers in the humanities is being matched by corresponding advances in real knowledge and understanding is always worth posing.

Arriving with at least as much fanfare as the revolution in cybernetics was the revolution of theory — a brave attempt not simply to cleanse, but sometimes even to shatter the windows of perception. In its actual manifestations, what this movement has often involved is yet another flight from meaning, quite explicitly so in the more extreme forms of deconstructive criticism. During the last fifteen years of the twentieth century the concept of meaning was thereby pluralized so successfully, whether with regard to the historical reception of literary works or their phenomenological existence among readers, that for a while it seemed as though there could be no constraints on what a literary work meant other than what an individual reader wanted it to mean.[9] The glee that was felt by some critics at this development was not shared by all members of the academy. One popular means of rehabilitating the possibility that literary works might be ascribed some communally accepted meanings has been to apply the filter of 'political correctness' — a pejorative term that calls attention to a researcher's disinterest in results that do not reinforce a set of beliefs and commitments that is already sealed and delivered.

During these same years, research into gender and sexuality made great strides towards liberating academic research from some of its most deeply entrenched biases. Predictably, however, writings of this orientation have also promoted a corresponding movement towards 'gender correctness' in the pursuit of meanings that, while by no means *idel ond unnyt*,[10] have had the drawback of being resolutely predictable. Some of the more committed studies undertaken along these lines have even made one wonder, at times, if female chauvinism is indeed to be preferred to its male counterpart.

The great benefit of the postmodern scholarly trend that is loosely called 'the New Historicism' (or, more aptly, 'cultural poetics') has been the opening up of

[9] Medievalists interested in these developments are likely to find much of value in the volume *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, ed. by Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Schichtman (Ithaca, NY, 1987), including the editors' introduction, 'Critical Theory and the Study of the Middle Ages' (pp. 1–11).

[10] 'Empty and useless', in the phrasing of two Old English poets (*Genesis* 106a, *Beowulf* 413a).

the categories of history and literature so as to reveal all narrative writings as stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves. While this movement has often succeeded in uncovering the hidden ideological engines that turn the wheels of narrative, it has also often represented a flight, if not from meaning, then at least from the kinds of meaning that are revealed through the precise, patient analysis of literary texts. In the pursuit of sensational social-historical anecdotes, without rigorous engagement with the particulars of texts or, for that matter, with the substance of intellectual history, the New Historicism can easily degenerate into that kind of cultural criticism that is fuelled by little else than the impulse to display the scholar-critic's pre-eminence when measured by standards applauded in enlightened circles today.

If someone of greater circumspection than myself were to review still more recent trends in scholarly approaches to Old English poetry, that person would surely refrain from directing barbs at two sacred cows that have settled down in the midst of the current scholarly marketplace. Each of these movements, too, however, might benefit from ever so delicate a goading. In the contemporary scene in Anglo-Saxon scholarship, source studies — that is, the attempt to trace the pedigree of each element of a text, almost always with reference to distinguished Latin forebears — is one of the more popular flights from meaning, as it was in its earlier, more value-laden incarnation in the form of Robertsonian patristic criticism. Knowledge of the sources of a text is always a useful prelude to its understanding. Moreover, when source studies are undertaken systematically, they can shed a great deal of light on the intellectual tenor of an era, for they indicate what an author has been reading and what authorities he or she respects. If pursued as an end in itself, however, the sport of chalking up sources (like the sport of ferreting out formulas) can easily start to resemble yet another escapist exercise.

An even more seductive way to avoid contact with the meaning of texts, it now seems, is through the 'back to the manuscripts' movement.[11] While crucial to the understanding of what we mean when we talk about texts and editions, and

[11] I adopt that phrase from Thomas A. Bredehoft, *Textual Histories: Readings in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Toronto, 2001), p. 137. Bredehoft makes some well-founded observations regarding how readers' responses to the different recensions of the *Chronicle* can be affected by scribal minutiae. What is not clear to me is the extent to which one's understanding of substantive aspects of the *Chronicle* is forcefully affected by this kind of analysis. I mention this example arbitrarily, in a spirit of respect for Bredehoft's discriminating scholarship, in order to spur reflection about a movement that seems so persuasive in some circles at the present time as to be almost impervious to criticism.

indeed while touching on the basis of all that is known about medieval literature, the close study of scribal practices (including pointing, capitalization, and other minute or trivial features of a not-always-brilliantly copied text) can represent yet another flight from meaning if pursued as the end of a scholarly quest rather than a means of pursuing it. Paradoxically, I believe, instances could be cited where the very close scrutiny of texts via one or another technological enhancement may have led to some errors in the reading of individual characters. Whatever the validity of that point may be, the 'back to the manuscripts' movement has led to some curiously zealous statements being made concerning an editor's responsibility never to edit the text, even though the scribes are sometimes the worst enemies of the sense. Perhaps the ancient principle of μηδέν ἄγαν — 'moderation in all things' — remains a virtue?

I like to think of the present book as being in conversation with all these critical movements without being overwhelmed by any one of them. While my research into the earliest English poetry is enriched by every one of these fertilizing streams, I am also content to watch them all flow by, each in turn taking its moment to flash in the sun, where for a time it may seem the only thing worth thinking about. The Old English texts remain: recalcitrant, beautiful, saturated with their own meanings.

Chapter 1

LOCATING *BEOWULF* IN LITERARY HISTORY

Faced with the problem of making sense of a poem like *Beowulf* — a poem from a very different epoch, composed according to stylistic criteria that differ markedly from those in fashion today — readers naturally want to ask 'What does it mean?'. Related to this question is a similar one favoured by English professors, who like to take literary machines apart to see how they tick: 'How does the poem mean?'. Without neglecting either of these questions, neither one of which leads to simple answers, I wish to focus attention on a third one that is not so frequently asked: '*What work did the poem do?*'.

Putting the same matter in other words, what I propose to ask is 'What are the cultural questions to which *Beowulf* is an answer?'. This perspective involves, among other things, looking upon Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry as a discourse, in Michel Foucault's sense of a corporate means for dealing with a subject and authorizing views of it. Adopting this stance, we can inquire how the poetic tradition of which *Beowulf* is an example served as one important means by which a culture defined itself, validated itself, and maintained its equilibrium through strategic adaptations during a period of major change.[1]

Thanks in part to the impressive formalist scholarship of the past fifty years, we are accustomed to reading *Beowulf* as a superb work of art. The achievement of the broadly philological scholarship that has dominated the academies within living memory has been to create this poem as an aesthetic object worthy of minute critical inquiry. Structuralist approaches, patristic source studies, and oral-formulaic analyses of patterned phrasing have indeed extended our knowledge of

[1] I explore this topic in 'Reconceiving *Beowulf:* Poetry as Social Praxis', *College English*, 61 (1998), 143–66, repr. in *Beowulf: A Prose Translation*, 2nd edn, ed. by Nicholas Howe (New York, 2002), pp. 111–34, and also reworked as ch. 3 (pp. 66–88) of *Homo Narrans*.

the text, its filiations, and its internal systems of order. Paradoxically, the success of these modes of criticism may also have served to occlude our understanding of *Beowulf* as a socially embedded poetic act. As John Hermann has remarked, writing of the philological heritage of modern criticism, 'The problem is that it has been too successful; its very dominance keeps Old English studies from developing in new directions'.[2]

Like Hermann and some other scholars of a revisionist persuasion, I suspect that the issue of understanding a poem of this kind cannot be resolved by philological or aesthetic investigations alone. That is not to say that such inquiries, if well conducted, will not form the basis of our understanding. They will. But the underlying issue is ontological, not aesthetic. To paraphrase Leo Spitzer,[3] what one wants to know is 'Why did the phenomenon of *Beowulf* happen at all?'

Answering this question means reading that poem as a literary act with cultural antecedents and consequences. To begin with, this means reconstructing an Anglo-Saxon context within which the textual existence of a poem of this kind makes sense. I am not speaking of a 'background', in the repudiated sense, but rather of a historical matrix in which the discourse of heroic poetry took place — whether in oral performance or in manuscript records — and which this discourse had some power to shape, as well. As we proceed along these lines, eventually in the direction of assessing the poem's place in a larger cultural heritage that extends to the present day, we can discard earlier conceptions to the effect that *Beowulf* reflects the mentality of one specific group of people located in one time or place, or provides a clear window on early Germanic social institutions, or stands as an unambiguous statement of heroic values, Christian allegory, or some other abstraction. Instead, we can read the poem as a complex work of art that responded to tensions, agreements, and disagreements in the society from which it came, just as its text has provoked many conflicting responses on the part of readers in the last two centuries. Some readers, following Mikhail Bakhtin, have contrasted epic poetry to the novel, seeing it as a monologic genre that expresses a kind of party line.[4]

[2] John P. Hermann, *Allegories of War: Language and Violence in Old English Poetry* (Ann Arbor, 1989), p. 199.

[3] Leo Spitzer, *Linguistics and Literary History: Essays in Stylistics* (Princeton, 1948), pp. 3–4.

[4] M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, 1981), especially the first essay, 'Epic and Novel' (pp. 3–40). For a critique of this aspect of Bakhtin's work, see Ward Parks, 'The Textualization of Orality in Literary Criticism', in *Vox Intexta: Orality and Textuality in the Middle Ages*, ed. by A. N. Doane and Carol Braun Pasternack (Madison, 1991), pp. 46–61.

This may be true of some epic poems. If so, I have not come across them. Much can be learned about *Beowulf*, I believe, by approaching it as a polyphonic work whose messages are contingent and sometimes contrary.

Rather than reflecting the static conditions of a single or simple age, *Beowulf* represents a broad collective response to changes that affected a complex society during a period of major transformations. To note only the most obvious of these changes: by the time that this poem was put down in writing,[5] the English-speaking peoples of Britain had turned away from pagan beliefs and had embraced the teachings of Christianity. They had weathered the storm of Viking invasions and had established control of a mixed and somewhat turbulent Anglo-Scandinavian society. They were no longer competing against one another as separate tribes ruled by warlords or regional kings but had developed a unified kingdom, built largely on the Carolingian model and administered through coinage, written documents, and a state bureaucracy. The changes that affected the society to which *Beowulf* pertains were momentous, and by their workings the nation that we call England came into being.

In particular, the society to which *Beowulf* pertains was using writing, and not just oral poetry, to express an ideology capable of persuading people to be governed and rulers to govern well. To an extent that still seems remarkable no matter how familiar one is with this phenomenon, late Anglo-Saxon England excelled in book-making, and much of this book-making was in the vernacular. Whether the literacy that book-making presupposes was ever widespread among the laity, we cannot know with certainty. By the time that *Beowulf* was written down,

[5] By 'the time that the poem was put down in writing', I mean the time that the unique surviving manuscript of *Beowulf* was written down at about AD 1000. Almost everyone agrees that this is a scribal copy. What is disputed is how long a poem we can meaningfully call *Beowulf* existed before this moment of copying. Even though Michael Lapidge has advanced a strong palaeographical argument for an eighth-century exemplar for that copy ('The Archetype of Beowulf', *ASE*, 29 (2000), 5–41), for reasons that are set forth below I do not see how the poem in its present form could have been composed before the tenth century, and probably not before the end of the first quarter of that century. The following discussion is based on this premise. Early-daters can still perhaps follow along with my discussion, granted that the poem, if composed earlier, continued in circulation until at least the end of the tenth century. Because I hesitate to engage in debate over a theory that is unlikely to be acceptable on paleographical grounds whatever its other merits may be, I will not address the arguments advanced by Kevin S. Kiernan in his book *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, 2nd edn (Ann Arbor, 1996) that *Beowulf* as we have it was composed by scribe B of that poem during the reign of King Cnut (1016–35). Interested readers may consult my review of the first edition of Kiernan's book in *Speculum*, 58 (1983), 765–67 or, better, Johan Gerritsen's stringent review article '*Beowulf* Revisited', *ES*, 79 (1998), 82–86.

however, at least some members of the lay aristocracy were no longer unlettered people relatively self-sufficient in their isolation from Mediterranean culture and, perhaps, indifferent or even hostile to the values that that culture represented. They were familiar with the use of poetry in English as a vehicle for Christian doctrine and a means of reinventing the Germanic past.

To see how these momentous events affect our reading of *Beowulf*, we should briefly place that poem into relation to the literary tradition that developed in post-Roman Britain once English-speaking kings had gained control of that land. I must apologize if this survey requires me to proceed over some well-worn ground; my justification for doing so is that I shall find out a somewhat different path than others have taken.

Heroic Poetry in the North Sea Culture Zone

When Britain was a Roman colony, many of its inhabitants were familiar with both the arts of literacy and the Christian faith. During the fourth and fifth centuries, however, for reasons that are not wholly clear, Roman Britain suffered an economic and administrative collapse that left it cut off from the rest of the empire, which was itself undergoing a 'systems collapse', to use a term in vogue among social scientists. Various forms of chaos and regression ensued until, according to tradition, Britain was conquered by Germanic-speaking invaders coming from the North Sea coastal zone. The first of these warriors came as mercenaries. Others then migrated in great numbers, killing or enslaving the inhabitants and establishing their own kingdoms along ancestral lines. This is the account that, from the time of Bede onwards, the people of Anglo-Saxon England gave of their historical origins, and most people of later ages have accepted it at its face value.

For archaeologists, the problem with this account is that there is little hard evidence for a large overseas migration that led to the conquest of Britain. A Roman collapse there was, but a Germanic conquest? Perhaps. There is much to be said for the theory, raised by Richard Hodges among others, whereby the myriad regions of post-Roman Britain evolved into the kingdoms of early Anglo-Saxon England rather than being replaced by them.[6] According to this theory, Roman Britain

[6] Richard Hodges, *The Anglo-Saxon Achievement: Archaeology and the Beginnings of English Society* (Ithaca, NY, 1989). This debate is not a new one, and the specific forms it has taken in the historiography of the past century and a half is traced by Donald A. White, 'Changing Views of the *Adventus Saxonum* in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century English Scholarship', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 32 (1971), 585–94. For more recent discussion of the different and compet-

became progressively more and more Germanized rather than being conquered outright. Eventually a 'myth of migration' then developed as a way of legitimizing the political interests that emerged in the postcolonial period, when warlords of Germanic stock or aspirations were intent on establishing their hegemony over a mixed population. In short, the myth of migration that Nicholas Howe has identified as one of the Anglo-Saxons' controlling political ideas[7] was a projection of a desire on the part of many inhabitants of Britain for a distinguished non-Roman racial past. For better or worse, this desire happens to have been replicated by many people in England, Germany, and the English-speaking diaspora during the period from the late eighteenth to the earlier twentieth century, when the tide of Western racial consciousness reached its high-water mark in modern times.[8]

Advocates of the theory of Germanization must respond to the spiny question of why Latin and the Celtic languages were so fully eclipsed by the English language in Britain. Whether or not the theory is correct, and it will be debated for years to come,[9] it has the attraction of drawing attention to the historicity of

ing claims of history and archaeology with regard to the period of the English Conquest, see *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, ed. by Steven Bassett (Leicester, 1989); John Hines, 'Philology, Archaeology and the *Adventus Saxonum vel Anglorum*', in *Britain 400–600: Language and History*, ed. by Alfred Bammesberger and Alfred Wollman (Heidelberg, 1990), pp. 17–36; N. J. Higham, *Rome, Britain, and the Anglo-Saxons* (London, 1992), esp. chs 1 and 8; Hines, 'The Becoming of the English: Identity, Material Culture and Language in Early Anglo-Saxon England', *ASSAH*, 7 (1994), 49–59; Sam Lucy, 'From Pots to People: Two Hundred Years of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology', in *'Lastworda Betst': Essays in Memory of Christine E. Fell*, ed. by Carole Hough and Kathryn A. Lowe (Donington, 2002), pp. 144–69; and Catherine Hills, *Origins of the English* (London, 2003). Warnings against reading Bede's account of the English Conquest in a literalist manner have frequently been voiced by specialist historians, including Patrick Sims-Williams, 'The Settlement of England in Bede and the *Chronicle*', *ASE*, 12 (1983), 1–41. Barbara Yorke, 'Fact or Fiction? The Written Evidence for the Fifth and Sixth Centuries AD', *ASSAH*, 6 (1993), 45–50, argues that a modern historical sensibility cannot well account for the nature of the historical records that pertain to a society that is dominantly pre-literate. She suggests that while these sources cannot be dismissed as fictional, the term 'factional' suits them well (p. 49).

[7] Nicholas Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Haven, 1989).

[8] Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA, 1981); Clare A. Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest: History and Myth in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (New Brunswick, 1990). Anglo-Saxonism as a general phenomenon is surveyed by Allen Frantzen and myself in the introduction (pp. 1–14) to *Anglo-Saxonism*. For a capsule discussion, see Simon Keynes, 'Anglo-Saxonism', in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, pp. 36–37.

[9] Higham, *Rome, Britain, and the Anglo-Saxons*, p. 234, presents a judicious summary of opinion on this point.

history; that is to say, the set of biases that make documents such as Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and the annals of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* untrustworthy as an account of 'what actually happened'. The theory is not contradicted by what we know of the human capacity for mythmaking. As Eric Hobsbawm and other historians have pointed out, there are few things more easily invented than a tradition that has existed since time immemorial.[10]

Whatever the process was by which Roman institutions were displaced in Britain, the island soon became part of a North Sea culture zone. During the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries, as new trade routes and intertribal connections linked the peoples of Britain with the other peoples fringing the North Sea, paganism of the Old Germanic type became increasingly the norm. Latin disappeared as the language of the ruling class. Germanic laws and customs took the place of Roman ones. The power of important leaders was displayed through the circulation of prestige goods as gifts and in the context of funerals, such as the spectacular seventh-century grave-sites at Taplow (Buckinghamshire) and Sutton Hoo (East Anglia).[11] Most important for our present concerns, Anglo-Saxon kingship took on insular forms in a land that was once again yielding the impressive agricultural surpluses that translate into cash and loot. By the early seventh century, kings were constructing palaces, such as the great hall at Yeavering, Northumberland, that must have served as the focal points of their realms and the most visible expressions of their prestige.[12] Cultivated poetry could flourish in milieus of this kind. From this time on, it is fair to surmise, stories relating to the Heroic Age, the half-mythical fourth- and fifth-century period of tribal migrations, found a favoured place in the repertory of singers vying for aristocratic patronage. Both then and now, people of noble status or ambitions have tended to have a weak spot for questions of lineage. Not only could heroic poetry express

[10] See the essays included in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, 1983), especially Hobsbawm's 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions' (pp. 1–14).

[11] Leslie Webster, 'Taplow Burial', in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, pp. 439–40; M. O. H. Carver, 'Sutton Hoo', in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, pp. 432–36; Carol Neuman de Vegvar, 'Sutton Hoo', in *Medieval England*, pp. 719–20. The full report *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial*, ed. by Rupert Bruce-Mitford, 3 vols in 4 parts (London, 1975–83), is the most impressive single publication on Anglo-Saxon archaeological sites, much as the Sutton Hoo site itself has produced more dramatic finds than any other. A comprehensive study of the Taplow burial, undertaken by Leslie Webster and others, is in preparation.

[12] Brian Hope-Taylor, *Yeavering: An Anglo-British Centre of Early Northumbria* (London, 1977); David A. Hinton and Douglas Mac Lean, 'Yeavering', in *Medieval England*, pp. 826–27.

the ideology of current regimes, legitimizing structures of power through tales of their ancestors. It could also satisfy the desire for origins, to use Allen Frantzen's phrase,[13] that anyone in Britain may have felt at this time.

In this formative period, apparently, there developed a tradition of heroic poetry of the kind that Alcuin complains about, in his famous letter of 797, specifying the dire consequences that follow when monks, allowing their strict discipline to lapse, listen to harpers singing songs of Ingeld instead of hearing the words of Scripture read aloud.[14] The vernacular tradition that Alcuin sought to root out from the monasteries eventually found complex literary expression in the texts that we now know as *Beowulf*, *Waldere*, and *The Battle of Finnsburh*, all of which were copied out by monks or, conceivably, members of the secular clergy. During this earlier formative period, the members of the ruling class had little use for books but possessed a well-developed literature without letters. They were familiar with runes but used them for practical rather than literary purposes. Instead, in keeping with Old Germanic practice, they seem to have delighted in poems and songs performed aloud in celebration of kings and heroes.[15]

The Oral Matrix of Written Texts

Too frequently in the past, the study of the putative oral roots of texts that have come down to us in writing has been undertaken in a spirit of celebration of a golden childhood of the race from which literacy has lamentably cut us off. Work of this odour has a way of provoking an allergic reaction on the part of scholars who value both their own literacy and that of the Anglo-Saxons. Given the history of these debates, it is worth taking a moment to reconsider the oral matrix from which some of our extant texts are likely to derive.[16]

[13] Allen J. Frantzen, *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition* (New Brunswick, 1990).

[14] Chambers, *Intro.*, p. 22.

[15] R. W. Chambers reviews this heritage of oral poetry in 'The Lost Literature of Medieval England', *The Library*, 4th series, 5 (1925), 293–321, repr. in *Essential Articles for the Study of Old English Poetry*, ed. by Jess B. Bessinger, Jr, and Stanley J. Kahrl (Hamden, 1968), pp. 3–26 (esp. pp. 8–11). The evidence from classical authors bearing on Germanic oral tradition is surveyed by Jeff Opland, *Anglo-Saxon Oral Poetry: A Study of the Traditions* (New Haven, 1980), pp. 40–73.

[16] For an overview of issues relating to the understanding of oral poetry, see Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context* (Cambridge, 1977). For a review of research in the fields of orality and literacy with particular attention to the medieval connection

Understanding the literature that has emerged in a dominantly oral context is not an easy task, whether we are speaking of the past or the present. As Brian Stock has aptly remarked, 'it may be asked whether, as literates, we understand orality as anything but the opposite of literacy'.[17] People whose lives are deeply invested in Western educational institutions naturally tend to understand illiteracy as nothing but deprivation, and this attitude is reinforced by a host of governmental agencies. These days some people even speak of 'cultural literacy' as a synonym for broadly based humanistic knowledge of the kind that educated people ought to have, while 'cultural illiteracy' is another term for unwashed ignorance. During the past hundred and fifty years, as the disciplines of anthropology and folklore have emerged into their modern forms, the search for the primitive or folk 'other' has sometimes been pursued as a foil for the dominant culture's quest for its self-identity. Remnants of once viable oral cultures have been folklorized to indulge the nostalgia of the dominant society and to swell the pocketbooks of entrepreneurs. Even good anthropological and folkloric research has sometimes been received in an atmosphere of colonialism or ethnocentrism, so that just by employing the value-laden concepts of literacy and orality, in Stock's view, 'we thus run the risk of intellectual imperialism among peoples that do not share our faith in the value of writing'.[18]

The fundamental and almost inevitable bias with which we favour the written word can affect our ability to understand a poem like *Beowulf*, which both is rooted in an oral culture and depicts one, in fictive guise. If we look upon an oral culture as lacking something that it should have in order to be complete, we will not understand it as a working system with its own efficacy and equilibrium.

Active or strong tradition-bearers who are the heart of an oral tradition — who are its motor, so to speak — are likely to have a recognizable style that sets them apart from other performers.[19] When we look for that hypostatic entity that we call 'the

and with reference to the work of Eric Havelock, Walter Ong, Jack Goody, Michael Clanchy, Franz Bäuml, and other researchers in this area, see D. H. Green, 'Orality and Reading: The State of Research in Medieval Studies', *Speculum*, 65 (1990), 267–80. For a critique of Anglo-Saxon orality and textuality from a postmodern theoretical stance, see Martin Irvine, 'Medieval Textuality and the Archaeology of Textual Culture', in *Speaking Two Languages: Traditional Disciplines and Contemporary Theory in Medieval Studies*, ed. Allen J. Frantzen (Albany, 1991), pp. 181–210 and 276–84.

[17] Brian Stock, *Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past* (Baltimore, 1990), p. 9.

[18] Stock, *Listening for the Text*, p. 9.

[19] The influential concept of active versus passive tradition-bearers goes back to the work of C. W. von Sydow, 'On the Spread of Tradition', repr. in his *Selected Papers on Folklore*, ed. by

tradition', in fact, what we find are just such creative individuals, each with his or her individual character. As specialists in a valued art, these people tend to be known and honoured by name in their communities. They are the makers of the tradition, not its slaves, and their creativity is sometimes evident in their personal style, which may encompass a flamboyant display of figurative language as well as an ability to spin simple tales into complex, highly ornamented works of art. The most gifted singer recorded by Milman Parry and Albert Lord, Avdo Medjedović of the village of Obrov in eastern Montenegro, was able to hear a song performed by a less skilled person, meditate on it overnight, and perform the same song the next day at nearly three times its earlier length, expanding the story with ornamental details of the kind that were prized in this tradition: catalogs of names, descriptions of men, horses, and weapons, detailed journeys, examples of direct discourse, evocations of personal emotion on the part of actors, flashbacks in time, and the like.[20]

Fieldwork that I undertook with Scotland's travelling people in 1984, 1986, 1987, and 1988 reinforces this point. Duncan Williamson of Argyll and Fife (b. 1928), the person whom I have recorded at greatest length, is a connoisseur of oral traditions. He has made a lifetime habit of listening intently to other performers and absorbing their words, so that now, in his late seventies, he is a walking encyclopedia of songs, stories, riddles, and other lore that he has learned from family members, crofters, fellow workers, tramps, and friends. He not only has a phenomenal repertory of songs and stories, he also has compiled full versions of songs that he learned from other people only in fragments; and when he learns a new story, he is likely to retell it at length, in his own fully ornamented style. When other singers falter he is often able to prompt them. In private, though never to their face, he can be a sharp critic of other people's performances. It is through active, self-conscious, intelligent tradition-bearers like Medjedović and Williamson that an oral culture realizes its full potential.[21]

Laurits Bødker (Copenhagen, 1948), pp. 11–43 (pp. 12–13). I have built on that concept in ch. 7 of *Homo Narrans*, 'The Strong Tradition-Bearer' (pp. 173–93). The 'active' tradition-bearer, in Von Sydow's formulation, is one who has the confidence and competence to perform aloud. The 'strong' one, in my formulation, is one who has the capacity to modify tradition through the force of individual talent.

[20] Albert Bates Lord, 'Avdo Međedović, *Guslar*', *Journal of American Folklore*, 69 (1956), 320–30, repr. in his *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition* (Ithaca, NY, 1991), pp. 57–71. See also Medjedović, *The Wedding of Smailagić Meho*, trans. by Lord, vol. III in the series *Serbo-Croatian Heroic Songs*, collected by Milman Parry (Cambridge, MA, 1974).

[21] Williamson is featured in my chapter 'The Strong Tradition-Bearer' in *Homo Narrans*. See also Timothy Neat, 'Duncan Williamson, Argyllshire Traveller', in his *The Voice of the Bard: Liv-*

It would be a mistake to see such persons as isolated geniuses. Strong tradition-bearers can only flourish as members of a community of like-minded individuals. Traditional singers or storytellers tend to articulate accepted wisdom. Their art is the art of perfecting known modes of expression and familiar themes, not inventing new ones. Gifted performers like these bring established genres to a fine point of expression to the delight of listeners who have competence in this medium. Oral narrative can thus serve important functions of education and acculturation in the society in which it occurs. It tends to be one of the most important means by which children absorb the values of adult society and learn to pattern their behaviour according to accepted norms. For adults, it confirms the nexus of understanding that constitutes their knowledge of the past and of the world around them, their social structure, and their capacity for moral action.

Transformation and Synthesis in Post-Gregorian England

The culture of early Anglo-Saxon England began undergoing the first of its crises of identity beginning in the year 597 when, according to Bede, missionaries sent by Pope Gregory the Great arrived in Kent to forge a new kind of colonial relationship between a set of Germanized kingdoms and what was now also a fairly thoroughly Germanized Rome. This missionary activity was both reinforced and threatened by the corresponding work of Irish monks in northern Britain. The relative speed with which the rulers of seventh-century Britain came to adopt Christianity — and adopt it systematically, not just as one of a number of competing cults — speaks of their desire for participation in a wider world of power and history than their myth of migration could provide.

Anglo-Saxon literature offers abundant evidence of a dynamic and sometimes contradictory accommodation of religious and temporal values during the period after the Conversion.[22] While the new religion had an effect on the Anglo-Saxons'

ing Poets and Ancient Traditions in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland (Edinburgh, 1999), pp. 237–67. Donald Braid's book *Scottish Traveller Tales: Lives Shaped through Stories* (Jackson, MS, 2002), consists largely of a sustained study of Williamson and members of his family. A number of collections of Williamson's stories have appeared in print as edited by Linda Williamson from tape-recorded performances; noteworthy among these are *Fireside Tales of the Traveller Children* (Edinburgh, 1983) and *A Thorn in the King's Foot* (Harmondsworth, 1987). My Scottish fieldwork collection is housed in the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

[22] Michael D. Cherniss, *Ingeld and Christ: Heroic Concepts and Values in Old English Christian Poetry* (The Hague, 1972), analyses how this accommodation affected religious poetry. Charles J.

ethics, perhaps yet stronger was its impact on their sense of identity. The proud pagan kings of sixth- and seventh-century Britain doubtless considered their domains to be central and normal, as most people like to do. With the Conversion, they were faced with an alternative perspective whereby they were peripheral members of a larger Christian community whose centres of physical and spiritual power were farther East, in Rome and Jerusalem. In this larger geographical context, purely Germanic customs were potentially aberrant. In like manner, Anglo-Saxon history could come to seem merely insular. One of the effects of the Conversion was to subordinate the northern past to the history of the Mediterranean lands. The extended pseudo-genealogy that the West Saxon royal line devised for itself by the time of King Alfred the Great, and that is incorporated into the Parker Chronicle under the year 855,[23] is perhaps the single most dramatic manifestation of this tendency.[24] According to this concept of history, the Kings of Wessex no longer traced their lineage back to Woden as divine ancestor. Instead, Woden in euhemerized form (as we may assume) became an intermediate link in a grand line of descent from Noah, and hence from Adam. The Angles and Saxons were thus welcomed to the family of the people of the Book, just as their kingdoms became an outpost of Roman ecclesiastical organization. Germanic, Roman, and biblical antiquity became three parts of a single past.[25]

These transformations were made possible through the mastery of writing, or what Jack Goody has called the technology of the intellect.[26] Writing made far-flung ecclesiastical organization possible. In time, it also nurtured the growth of a state bureaucracy to facilitate large-scale administration and finance. As Seth Lerer has made clear, writing was a linking device that promoted complex cultural

Donahue, 'Social Function and Literary Value in *Beowulf* ', in *The Epic in Medieval Society: Aesthetic and Moral Values*, ed. by Harald Scholler (Tübingen, 1977), pp. 382–90, offers brief but stimulating suggestions about how this change affected *Beowulf*.

[23] That is, Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 173 (the 'A' version of the *Chronicle*).

[24] See Kenneth Sisam, 'Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 39 (1953), 287–348, and David N. Dumville, 'Kingship, Genealogies and Regnal Lists', in *Early Medieval Kingship*, ed. by P. H. Sawyer and I. N. Wood (Leeds, 1977), pp. 72–104. Michael Lapidge, '*Beowulf*, Aldhelm, the *Liber Monstrorum*, and Wessex', *Studi Medievali*, 23 (1982), 151–92, holds that the extension from Geat back to Sceaf, and eventually to Adam, is a fabrication that 'was done with Alfred's consent and arguably at his instigation' (p. 187).

[25] On this synthesis, see Michael Hunter, 'Germanic and Roman Antiquity and the Sense of the Past in Anglo-Saxon England', *ASE*, 3 (1974), 29–50.

[26] Jack Goody, *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 59.

connections, as when Bede incorporated written documents such as papal letters into his *Ecclesiastical History* or when various Anglo-Saxon authors wrote glosses on scriptural texts and those glosses in turn inspired later commentary.[27] By permitting knowledge to be accumulated in stable form in books and monastic libraries, the technology of writing fostered the growth of science, in partial displacement of magic. By calibrating time in the form of annals, writing made possible history in something like the modern sense. It also allowed for the invention of literature as we know it today, with its allusive and densely intertextual character, as opposed to the poetry that was known only in face-to-face encounters.[28]

As Patrick Wormald has shown in an important attempt to set *Beowulf* within the aristocratic climate of early English Christianity, it would be a mistake to look upon Anglo-Saxon monks as a separate class with no worldly interests.[29] By birth as well as personal outlook, many monks had links with the secular aristocracy. Some noblemen seem to have looked upon certain monasteries as, in essence, their private domains, and abbots and priors were naturally drawn from the ranks of the upper class. Anglo-Saxon *boceras* 'makers of books' thus comprised an elite group not only thanks to their knowledge, with its attendant power, but also through their social connections. The clergy may have had strong influence in the secular realm from early on. Certainly it did so by the end of the ninth century, once King Alfred, following the lead of King Offa of Mercia, had reorganized the West Saxon kingdom on the Carolingian model, with a strong emphasis on piety and the literate arts. By this time, the commonplaces of Latin learning were filtering through to all levels of the vernacular culture. But in the meantime, a major external threat had imperiled the continuity of life and letters in Britain.

It is no accident that we know of the defence of southern Britain from Viking marauders chiefly through a literary source, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, that seems to have been initiated with King Alfred's blessing. Like many canny statesmen, Alfred was aware of the political uses of literacy, and the *Chronicle* could be called the first piece of political propaganda written in English.[30] Its annals for the years

[27] Seth Lerer, *Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Lincoln, 1991).

[28] Jeff Opland, 'From Horseback to Monastic Cell: The Impact on English Literature of the Technology of Writing', in *Oral Literature in Context: Ten Essays*, ed. by John D. Niles (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 30–43, offers a stimulating account of this transformation.

[29] Patrick Wormald, 'Bede, *Beowulf*, and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy', in *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Robert T. Farrell, BAR, 46 (Oxford, 1978), pp. 32–95.

[30] This is a point made by R. H. C. Davis in his study 'Alfred the Great: Propaganda and Truth', *History*, 56 (1971), 169–82.

from 871 to 896 consistently take on a West Saxon perspective and show the King in a sympathetic and indeed heroic light. The same is true of Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, a biography whose chief literary model was Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne*. Whether or not the biography is the eyewitness report that it claims to be — and a case has sometimes been made that it is not[31] — by telling of Alfred's tenacious efforts to learn to read, it gives that King a heroic role in the revival of English learning. Taken together, the literary translations from Latin into English that Alfred either sponsored, encouraged, or undertook in person could be said to represent the first literary canon in English. Europe had not seen such a burst of literary activity since the age of Charlemagne.

Unlike Charlemagne, however, Alfred encouraged the growth of a kind of literacy that was previously of little importance in England while being virtually unknown elsewhere in Europe. This was literacy in the vernacular. To the extent that the ambitious program of education that he announced in his famous letter prefacing the translation of Gregory's *Pastoral Care* was realized, it broadened the base of the pyramid of learning, making reading and writing less of an esoteric exercise on the part of the clerical elite.[32]

[31] This is not, however, an issue that I either wish to debate or feel qualified to adjudicate. The case against the authenticity of the history as an account contemporary with King Alfred has been reopened in recent years by Alfred P. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford, 1995); see more recently Smyth, *The Medieval Life of King Alfred the Great: A Translation and Commentary on the Text Attributed to Asser* (New York, 2002). Smyth argues that the book that claims to be by Asser's own hand is a late tenth-century composition that was back-dated to Alfred's day. If his argument is valid, then the biography reveals more about the process of early English mythmaking than about the facts of Alfred's reign. Smyth's points have been met with vigorous resistance on the part of several reviewers of his 1995 book, including both Michael Lapidge and Simon Keynes, whose collection *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources* (Harmondsworth, 1983) includes valuable commentary based on the premise that the work attributed to Asser is what it claims to be.

[32] What was remarkable about this programme is that English was to be the first language of literacy; Latin was then to be taught to those who wished to go on to a higher rank or office, either among the clergy or, perhaps, in secular life. On the progress of Alfred's educational reforms, see D. A. Bullough, 'The Educational Tradition in England from Alfred to Aelfric: Teaching *Utriusque Linguae*', in 'La scuola nell'Occidente latino dell'alto Medioevo', *Settimane*, 19 (1972), pt 2, pp. 453–94. Malcolm Godden, 'King Alfred's Preface and the Teaching of Latin in Anglo-Saxon England', *English Historical Review*, 117 (2002), 596–604, doubts the conventional interpretation that King Alfred sought to institute the systematic teaching of Latin to members of the clergy; he stresses, rather, that 'the teaching of Latin was not the King's main concern' and that 'his primary concern was with fostering literacy in the vernacular and adding to the body of texts available in English, for both the laity and clergy' (p. 604).

King Alfred's accomplishments laid the foundations for a period that with little exaggeration, in the English context, could be called the Renaissance of the tenth century. This was a time of consolidation and growth in many spheres. The story of the Danes in Britain during this period is largely one of accommodation and acculturation. Viking inhabitants of the Danelaw intermarried with the English, accepted the Christian faith, and began to take on positions of responsibility in both Church and state. Using grand gestures, Alfred's grandson King Æthelstan styled himself by such honorific titles as *basileus* 'imperial king', *imperator* 'emperor', and *Angelsaxonum Denorumque gloriosissimus rex* 'most glorious king of the Anglo-Saxons and Danes'.[33] By Æthelstan's reign (924–39), it is possible for the first time to speak of the English nation.[34]

The flowering of literary arts during the later tenth century justifies our speaking of this period as a golden age of vernacular letters. The glow of this period had a long afterlife, as well. Although this period has often escaped the notice of intellectual historians, who have tended to direct their gaze more toward somewhat later developments on the Continent, it is with justice that Helmut Gneuss has remarked, 'für England sei in Wahrheit aber das 10. Jahrhundert das *grand siècle*'.[35] In keeping with the literary program of his immediate predecessors, King Æthelstan had scribes at his disposal and accumulated an impressive number of manuscripts, some of which he distributed strategically as gifts.[36] In subsequent years, after old monasteries were re-established and many new ones founded, all of them affected by the Benedictine reform of the second half of the tenth century, scribes produced a wealth of manuscripts written in both Latin and English.

[33] F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1971), p. 353.

[34] The contentious process by which the English can be said to have become a nation is discussed from different perspectives by Patrick Wormald, '*Engla Lond:* The Making of an Allegiance', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 7 (1994), 1–24, repr. with an additional note in his *Legal Culture in the Early Medieval West* (London, 1999), pp. 359–82; James Campbell, 'The United Kingdom of England: The Anglo-Saxon Achievement', in *Uniting the Kingdom? The Making of British History*, ed. by Alexander Grant and Keith J. Stringer (London, 1995), pp. 31–47; and Sarah Foot, 'The Making of the *Angelcynn*: English Identity before the Norman Conquest', *TRHS*, 6th series, 6 (1996), 25–49.

[35] 'For England, however, the tenth century is the crowning century': Helmut Gneuss, 'Bücher und Leser in England im zehnten Jahrhundert', in *Medialität und mitteralterliche insulare Literatur*, ed. by H. L. C. Tristram, ScriptOralia, 12 (Tübingen, 1992), pp. 104–30 (p. 104).

[36] Simon Keynes, 'King Athelstan's Books', in *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England: Studies Presented to Peter Clemoes on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. by Michael Lapidge and Helmut Gneuss (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 143–201.

All but a few of the Old English writings that have come down to us, including the great poetic codices that were written down about the year 1000, date from this tenth- and eleventh-century period.[37]

Beowulf *and English State Formation*

The question remains as to how *Beowulf* relates to these events. It should be divided into two parts. First, what is the probable origin of the ritualized discourse, the collective heroic verse-making tradition, that finds textual expression in *Beowulf*? And second, what is the probable origin of this individual poem, in the shape that we now have it? Who wrote this text down, approximately when, and for what reasons?

The first question can only be answered by hypothesis, and I have already made my guess. Inasmuch as a tradition of heroic poetry was cultivated by the Anglo-Saxon warrior class, it probably dates to the period of growth and consolidation of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms during the sixth to eighth centuries AD. In its basic formal characteristics it may well go as far back as to the songs that once circulated among Germanic tribes on the Continent. These early songs, however, must have differed markedly from the elaborate heroic poetry that developed in England in the course of time. Blessed with wealth and occasional leisure, the Anglo-Saxons of the ruling class drew on stories relating to the age of migrations as the materials of a collective dialogue about the past. They imagined the Heroic Age of their ancestors as a legendary counterpart to their own era, one that chartered their cherished institutions of kingship, thegnship, gift-giving, oath-swearing, and vengeance. They peopled this realm with fabulous kings and heroes — Hengest, Finn, Offa, Eormanric, and others, to cite examples only from *Beowulf* — whose names are attested in various and shifting ways in the genealogies of Anglo-Saxon kings. To these major dynastic figures they conjoined other lords and heroes whose names figured prominently in the oral history of the tribes of the North Sea rim: Hygelac, Sigemund, Weland, Hama, Ingeld, Ongentheow, and the like, again to cite examples only from *Beowulf*, leaving aside the names that are put on display in *Widsith* and *Deor* or that figure in the *Waldere* or *Finnsburh* fragments or other sources. Heroic poetry relating to this age of heroes served to express — or,

[37] According to figures compiled by N. R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford, 1957), pp. xv–xix, of the 189 major manuscripts written in Old English, 154 date from the tenth and eleventh centuries.

perhaps, to put into question, depending on how that poetry was interpreted[38] — the ideology of the Anglo-Saxon ruling class through narratives that were not history, but were a form of history. This poetry reconstructed in imaginary form that period of the past that was felt to have genealogical continuity with the present, as people wanted the present to be.

As for *Beowulf* as we now have it, we can begin with the certainty that the poem was composed during the three hundred–year period extending between the 'Cædmonian revolution' of the late seventh century and the time that our manuscript copy was written down, about the year 1000. In one sense or another, as part of a general movement by which songs were transformed into legible texts, the poem is a product of what German scholars have called *Verschriftlichung*,[39] or 'textualization'. In order to narrow down the limits within which this specific act of textualization took place, it is worth giving brief attention to the time of Cædmon, when English poetry was first taken down in writing.

Like most of the tales embedded in Bede's *History*, the story of Cædmon is a legendary account whose truth should not be confused with fact.[40] Whatever its

[38] The dual capacity of traditional narrative both to express ideology and to question it can be inferred from the modern critical reception of *Beowulf*. Scholarly opinions regarding the character and conduct of Beowulf the king, for example, have oscillated between admiration and moral critique. For a review of critics' opinions, see George Clark, 'The Hero and the Theme', in *A Beowulf Handbook*, pp. 271–90. In the introduction to that volume, I suggest that disagreements among current critics may have had their counterparts among members of the poem's original audiences (p. 10). More recently Andy Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (Cambridge, 2003), especially at pp. 238–64, has emphasized the ambiguity of the poet's depiction of the hero and heroism, calling attention to the way that different characters in the action give voice to distinct perspectives.

[39] See Alois Wolf, 'Die Verschriftlichung von europaischen Heldensagen als mittelalterliches Kulturproblem', in *Heldensage und Heldendichtung im Germanischen*, ed. by Heinrich Beck (Berlin, 1988), pp. 305–28, and 'Medieval Heroic Traditions and their Transitions from Orality to Literacy', in *Vox Intexta*, ed. by Doane and Pasternack, pp. 67–88. Valuable for their attention to specific detail are the essays included in *Textualization of Oral Epics*, ed. by Lauri Honko (Berlin, 2000).

[40] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 4:24; Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 414–21. Francis P. Magoun, Jr, 'Bede's Story of Cædman: The Case History of an Anglo-Saxon Oral Singer', *Speculum*, 30 (1955), 49–63, offers a lively if somewhat fanciful analysis of the story from the perspective of oral-formulaic theory. Donald K. Fry, 'The Memory of Cædmon', in *Oral Traditional Literature: A Festschrift for Albert Bates Lord*, ed. by John Miles Foley (Columbus, 1981), pp. 282–93, presents valuable insights into the role of traditional singers as keepers of the memories of their tribe. Inverting such perspectives, Martin Irvine reinscribes the story of Cædmon as 'an especially

historical basis may be (and one would be foolish to deny such a basis altogether), the story functions as a myth of the coming of culture. According to widespread belief, important new elements of human culture are not made but given. They are the product of a gifted person's inspiration in a moment of isolation, when contact with a numinous power is made possible through prayer or dream.[41] The myth lends divine sanction to the cultural innovation. In this instance, Bede's account of Cædmon serves as an origin myth for two related activities: the use of native verse to celebrate Christian themes, and the use of the technology of writing to record vernacular literature.

Although one still sometimes reads authoritative statements to the effect that 'when Christianity came to Northern Europe, one of its first tasks was to destroy non-Christian mythology, along with the heroic poetry that could serve as a rallying point for a cultural tradition outside Christianity',[42] in the Anglo-Saxon context such claims are fairly empty. Through euhemerizing the northern gods, the missionaries did indeed manage to eliminate them except as a racial memory, but heroic poetry is another matter. By following the example of Cædmon, Anglo-Saxon poets transmuted the medium of Old English verse into an instrument of Christian teaching. At the same time, by continuing to draw on themes from Germanic legendry as well as biblical history, they salvaged what they could from the historical ideas of their ancestors, not so as to compete with Christian faith but to bring this faith to more perfect expression, in terms that made sense to people of northern roots.

To begin with, Christian poets working in the vernacular had to learn to sing the divine names. This is what Cædmon's *Hymn* chiefly consists of.[43] But songs

valuable disclosure of the textuality of grammatical culture at work in Old English poems': *The Making of Textual Culture: 'Grammatica' and Literary Theory, 350–1100* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 433–34. Irvine treats the poems ascribed to Cædmon as glosses on the Latin, Christian textual tradition, using the term 'gloss' metaphorically.

[41] See Louise Pound, 'Cædmon's Dream Song', in *Studies in English Philology: A Miscellany in Honor of F. Klaeber*, ed. by Kemp Malone and Martin B. Ruud (Minneapolis, 1929), pp. 232–39. Pound assembles a number of mythic and legendary parallels to Bede's account, calling attention to the literal role of dream narratives in ceremonies of tribal initiation.

[42] Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, MA, 1976), p. 20.

[43] Dobbie, pp. 105–06. Names for the deity that appear in these nine lines of verse, in the West Saxon version, are *heofonrices weard* 'guardian of the kingdom of heaven', *meotod* 'the Lord, the ruler', *wuldorfæder* 'father of glory', *ece drihten* 'eternal Lord', *halig scyppend* 'holy creator', *moncynnes weard* 'guardian of humankind', and *frea ælmihtig* 'the almighty Lord'.

of praise were just the beginning. In time, poets learned to sing complex stories focusing on characters who shaped their thoughts and actions in accord with both heroic models and biblical ones. In the Old English verse paraphrase of Exodus, Moses resembles a Germanic warlord. In *Beowulf*, correspondingly, the hero takes on Moses-like or Christ-like attributes.[44] The poetic tradition thus proved itself resilient, like any deeply entrenched cultural form. Far from being insensitive to the changes that were taking place in society at large, Old English poetry retained its significance by adapting to the hybrid civilization, both Germanic and Mediterranean in origin, that was now ascendant in Britain.

Literary histories published before the 1980s regularly state that *Beowulf* was composed not long after the Cædmonian revolution and probably during the eighth century, or the period of Bede and Alcuin, sometime before the Vikings began their attacks. More recent scholarship has shaken this orthodoxy and has rekindled speculation that the poem derives from the Viking Age, much nearer the date of the extant manuscript.[45] Although certainty in this matter may never be attained, I agree that the poem as we have it is likely to derive from the tenth-

[44] The first of the transmutations involved here is discussed by Cherniss, *Ingeld and Christ*. On the second, note Gernot Wieland, '*Manna Mildost*: Moses and Beowulf', *Pacific Coast Philology*, 23 (1988), 86–93.

[45] The most important single publication with a bearing on this issue is *The Dating of Beowulf*, ed. by Colin Chase (Toronto, 1981), recently reprinted with an afterword by Nicholas Howe (Toronto, 1997). The studies in this volume, which represent many different perspectives, are far from exhausting the recent literature on this topic and should be supplemented by others including Nicolas Jacobs, 'Anglo-Danish Relations, Poetic Archaism, and the Date of *Beowulf*: A Reconsideration of the Evidence', *Poetica* [Tokyo], 8 (1977), 23–43; W. G. Busse and R. Holtei, '*Beowulf* and the Tenth Century', *BJRL*, 63 (1981), 285–329; R. D. Fulk, 'Dating *Beowulf* to the Viking Age', *PQ*, 61 (1982), 341–59; and Sam Newton, *The Origins of Beowulf and the Pre-Viking Kingdom of East Anglia* (Cambridge, 1993), in addition to Lapidge, 'Archetype of Beowulf', and Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*. Orchard, *Critical Companion to Beowulf*, cites additional studies at p. 6, n. 35. Fulk and Cain offer an insightful review of the dating problem and its implications (pp. 198–201), as does Meaney in the article cited in note 47 below. Roy Michael Liuzza, 'On the Dating of *Beowulf*', in *Beowulf: Basic Readings*, ed. by Peter S. Baker (New York, 1995), pp. 281–302, argues that 'the only meaningful date for the "effective composition" of *Beowulf* is that of the manuscript, since any version previously existing would be different to an unknowable degree from the surviving text' (pp. 294–95). His point can perhaps, with some hesitation, be granted for *Beowulf*, which survives in only one manuscript copy. It cannot be endorsed as a general principle, however, or we might arrive at such absurdities as a date of 'effective composition' of Homer's *Odyssey* in the tenth century AD, roughly contemporaneous with *Beowulf*.

century revival of vernacular learning. As far as *Beowulf* studies are concerned, the Anglo-Scandinavian period is a time whose idea has come.

There are many reasons for locating the making of *Beowulf* in the period of nation-building that followed after the ninth-century Viking invasions had been absorbed. Other persons may have other reasons for preferring either this date or an alternative one, but the following seven points, which I shall try to present succinctly, seem to me persuasive when taken together.

1. *The role of the Danes*. The action of most of the poem is set in Denmark and serves as a showcase for the magnificence of the Danish court. Such an interest in things Danish is understandable after the Danes had settled in England in some numbers, but not before. In addition, the poet depicts the Danes in an ambiguous light. Some of them are admirable, though better at talking than fighting. Others practise cursed rites, drink more beer than is good for them, or (like Hunferth, alias Unferth) have a way of blustering overmuch and stabbing one another in the back. As I have argued elsewhere, such an ambiguous portrait of the Danes fits the tenth-century period after the Viking wars had cooled. Brought up in the Christian faith, intermarrying with the English, many Danes were then being assimilated to the dominant culture and were taking on leading roles in it, in a process that surely, at certain times at least, involved tension and rivalry as well as peaceful accommodation.[46]

2. *The Scylding connection*. Near the beginning of *Beowulf* (lines 4–58) the poet calls prominent attention to the Danish king Scyld Scefing ('Scyld descendent of Scef') as the founding figure of the Scylding dynasty of kings, while twice, later

[46] I discuss this process of integration and accommodation in *Beowulf: The Poem and its Tradition* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), ch. 4, pp. 96–117. It is hard to know how thorough the mingling of the two peoples was. Surely it is a significant fact, however, that at least three powerful figures in the tenth-century English church were of Danish extraction: these were Oda, Archbishop of Canterbury (941–58); his nephew Oswald, Bishop of Worcester (961–92) and Archbishop of York (971–92); and Oscytel, Archbishop of York (956–71). For brief notice of the first two of these, see *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, pp. 339–40 and p. 348, respectively. Equally significantly, many personal names of Scandinavian extraction figure in the lists of witnesses to royal charters during this period of roughly AD 940–90. The presence of persons of Danish ancestry in positions of rank in the English Church and state is evidence of a strong official programme of accommodation of the two peoples, even if suspicions of Danish loyalty persisted, especially in the period after 991 when Viking attacks were renewed in force. These suspicions eventually culminated in the St Brice's Day massacre of 1002, a notorious instance of King Æthelred's inept rule and an event that may have provoked Swein Forkbeard to harry England in 1003 before eventually conquering it in 1013.

on, he draws attention to a notorious pre-Scylding king named Heremod (lines 901–15; 1709b–22a). At these points the poet's account either draws on or parallels the expanded West Saxon pseudo-genealogy that the West Saxon kings adopted by the time of King Alfred, apparently under Viking influence. This genealogy included early kings named Scyldwa and Heremod, going back to a still more shadowy King Sceaf, 'who was born in Noah's Ark'. By the late ninth century, through a major act of cultural assimilation, the genealogies of both Anglo-Saxon and Danish royal lines had thus been made to converge. The opening lines of *Beowulf* therefore celebrate an ancestral king of the English, not just of the Danes. The whole first part of that poem is thereby brought into relation to English history, which takes on a more specifically northern aspect as the Kings of Wessex and, in time, of the nascent state of England were honoured as rulers of both Anglo-Saxons and Danes, as we have seen.[47]

3. *Language and rhetoric*. With its well-developed vocabulary of religious experience as well as its assimilation of commonplace biblical and Latinate learning, the language in which *Beowulf* is composed shows affinities to that of other vernacular works that are plausibly dated to the tenth century or thereabouts. Worth noting here are the vocabulary and rhetoric not only of poems on secular themes, such as *The Wanderer* and *Widsith*, but also of devout works in verse like *Judith*, as well as late prose laws and sermons directed against pagan practices.[48]

[47] See Alexander Callander Murray, '*Beowulf*, the Danish Invasions, and Royal Genealogy', in *The Dating of Beowulf*, ed. by Chase, pp. 101–11; Audrey L. Meaney, 'Scyld Scefing and the Dating of *Beowulf* Again', *BJRL*, 71 (1989), 7–40, repr. in *Textual and Material Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Donald Scragg (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 23–53, with a substantial postscript on pp. 54–73; and Craig R. Davis, 'Cultural Assimilation in the Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies', *ASE*, 21 (1992), 232–36, reworked as ch. 3 (pp. 51–63) of his book *Beowulf and the Demise of Germanic Legend in England* (New York, 1996). Sam Newton discusses the place of Scyld in the Old English royal genealogies in ch. 3 (pp. 54–76) of his book *Origins of Beowulf* without taking those genealogies as evidence of Anglo-Danish cultural assimilation during the first Viking Age. This perspective is in keeping with his argument that *Beowulf* dates from pre-Viking times and that the poet's knowledge of Danish history derives chiefly from the age of tribal migrations. Alexander M. Bruce, *Scyld and Scef: Expanding the Analogues* (New York, 2002), provides a wealth of information on English and Scandinavian traditions relating to the Scylding dynasty, especially in his ch. 3, 'Scyld and Scef in English Genealogies of the Anglo-Saxon Period' (pp. 31–41). Bruce summarizes the arguments that have been made about the possible bearing of these genealogies on the date of *Beowulf* without reaching any conclusion in that regard (pp. 40–41).

[48] T. P. Dunning and A. J. Bliss, the editors of the Methuen edition of *The Wanderer* (London, 1969), find that 'There is no foundation for [the] assumption that *The Wanderer* is early; the supposition that it was written in the first half of the tenth century would solve many literary

Scholars who favour an eighth-century date for *Beowulf* have had notorious difficulty in accepting the authenticity of several overtly Christian passages that have a late feel to them.[49] The hypothesis of a tenth-century date eliminates this problem. In addition, certain skaldic turns of phrase in *Beowulf*, when taken in connection with the poet's sustained interest in things Scandinavian, suggest Norse influence from the post-Viking period.[50]

4. *Virtuous pagans*. While the *Beowulf* poet depicts the characters of his poem as pagans, as is historically accurate, he also presents at least some of them as admirable persons. Both Beowulf and Wiglaf are models of courage. As critics have noted, the aged Beowulf rules as a *rex justus*, pious and kind, somewhat nearer to the ideal of St Paul, St Augustine, and St Gregory the Great than one would predict of a Germanic warlord of the Heroic Age.[51] Many characters in the poem speak of God and His power. At one point Hrothgar, another *rex justus*, delivers so sententious an address, couched in familiar homiletic phrases, that many commentators have referred to it as a 'sermon' (lines 1700–84). No authors writing in Latin during the eighth century portrayed the pagan past in so favourable a light. Bede cast a cloak of silence over early Germanic legendry. Alcuin cried out against its influence in the monasteries. Only with the Alfredian renaissance do we see authors, writing now in English, exploiting the materials of Germanic legendry for pious or didactic ends, as when Alfred, paraphrasing Boethius on the subject of mutability, laments 'Hwær sint nu þæs wisan Welandes ban, / þæs

problems' (p. 104). R. L. Reynolds, 'Le poème anglo-saxon *Widsith*: Réalité et fiction', *Le Moyen Âge*, 59 (1953), 299–324 (at pp. 319–24), Gösta Langenfelt, 'Studies on *Widsith*', *Namm och Bygd*, 47 (1959), 70–111, and Joyce Hill, '*Widsith* and the Tenth Century', *NM*, 85 (1984), 305–15, agree on the probability of a tenth-century date for *Widsith*. Stanley B. Greenfield and Daniel G. Calder, *A New Critical History of Old English Literature* (New York, 1986), p. 219, accept the current opinion that *Judith* is of tenth-century date and West Saxon origin.

[49] An example is Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1951), pp. 77–78, following J. R. R. Tolkien, '*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 22 (1936), 245–95 (at p. 294, n. 34).

[50] Roberta Frank, 'Skaldic Verse and the Date of *Beowulf*', in *The Dating of Beowulf*, ed. by Chase, pp. 123–39.

[51] This point has persuasively been made by Levin L. Schücking, 'Das Königsideal in *Beowulf*', *Modern Humanities Research Association Bulletin*, 3 (1929), 143–54, trans. as 'The Ideal of Kingship in *Beowulf*', in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. by Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre Dame, 1963), pp. 35–49. Note additionally two studies by Maurice B. McNamee, '*Beowulf* – An Allegory of Salvation?', *JEGP*, 59 (1960), 190–207, and 'Beowulf, a Christian Hero', ch. 6 (pp. 86–117) of *Honor and the Epic Hero* (New York, 1960).

goldsmiþes þe wæs geo mærost?' (Where are now the bones of the skilled Weland, the goldsmith, who was once so famous?).[52] The *Beowulf* poet's interest in virtuous pagans is consistent with the Alfredian program of cultural reform, with its emphasis on the pious laity. As Roberta Frank has argued, the poem pertains to a stage of English culture when pagan Germanic lore no longer represented a threat to Christian spirituality, so that pagan Scandinavia could be used as the setting of a poem that addresses issues of salvation and spiritual evil.[53]

5. *Old Norse analogues*. The only close medieval analogues to the *Beowulf* story are preserved not in English but in Old Norse.[54] The *c.* fifteenth-century Icelandic saga *Hrólfs saga kraka*, in particular, tells of the adventures of a certain Bǫðvarr bjarki, the son of a man who was a man by night but a bear by day. Bǫðvarr travels from Gautland (corresponding to the *Beowulf* poet's land of the Gēatas) to Denmark so as to stay at the court of King Hrólfr kraki (corresponding to the *Beowulf* poet's Hrothulf, who in Danish tradition occupies a place equivalent to Hrothgar's in *Beowulf*). There he first humiliates Hrólfr's retainers and takes service with the King, then kills a beast described as 'the worst of trolls'. Although Theodore Andersson finds these parallels inconclusive, many other scholars, including Jesse Byock most recently, have seen here a structural parallel to *Beowulf*.[55] Another well-known fourteenth-century Icelandic saga, *Grettis saga* (composed

[52] Metre 10, lines 33–34; *The Paris Psalter and the Meters of Boethius*, ed. by George Philip Krapp, ASPR, 5 (New York, 1932), p. 166. For the Old English prose translation of Boethius on which these verses are based, see *King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius De Consolatione Philosophiae*, ed. by Walter John Sedgefield (Oxford, 1899), p. 46.

[53] Roberta Frank, 'The *Beowulf* Poet's Sense of History', in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*, ed. by Larry D. Benson and Siegfried Wenzel (Kalamazoo, 1982), pp. 53–65 and 271–77.

[54] See Klaeber, pp. xiv–xx; Chambers, *Intro.*, pp. 48–61 and 138–94; and Garmonsway and Simpson, pp. 302–31. For a review of these connections with current bibliography, see Orchard, *Critical Companion to Beowulf*, pp. 123–28 (esp. n. 128 on p. 123).

[55] Theodore M. Andersson, 'Sources and Analogues', in *A Beowulf Handbook*, pp. 125–48 (at pp. 132–33); *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, trans. by Jesse L. Byock (London, 1998), pp. xxv–xxviii. Jonathan D. M. Evans, 'Hrólfs saga kraka', in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by Phillip Pulsiano (New York, 1993), pp. 304–05, provides a succinct review of that saga with reference to its possible relation to *Beowulf*. While Fulk and Cain do not seek to resolve the question, they seem more inclined to accept the validity of the analogue than to reject it (p. 203). The fact that 'bjarki' means 'little bear' surely points to some connection with the *Beowulf* story, given that poem's resemblance to the 'Bear's Son' type of folktale (note 57 below). Also relevant in this regard are Beowulf's ursine affinities, such as his reluctance to use weapons and his name (if it is rightly construed as 'Bee-wolf', an apparent pet name for 'bear').

c. 1310–20) follows a different plot but includes two passages that markedly resemble what we find in the Danish episodes in *Beowulf*, once allowances are made for the difference of genre between an Old English aristocratic heroic poem and a much later Icelandic prose saga. These passages probably represent the closest parallels to *Beowulf* that have yet been pointed out, and even Andersson, who casts a cool eye on all the proposed analogues, sees 'not much doubt' of a connection here.[56] Other Old Norse analogues are found in *Orms þáttr Stórólfssonar* and *Samsons saga fagra*, among other texts that feature a 'two-troll' sequence of adventures. The evidence of these parallels, when taken together, is enough to show that the two-episode folktale pattern that has been shown to underlie the first two great fights in *Beowulf* was fairly well known at an early date in Scandinavia, although not necessarily in other parts of Europe.[57] The *Beowulf* poet drew out this core story at great length and gave it highly elaborate poetic ornamentation, in keeping with the habits of the heroic genre of which he was a master practitioner. Anglo-Scandinavian interchange during the ninth and tenth centuries, particularly via the Danelaw, may not be the only way of accounting for this shared story-pattern, but it is the easiest way.

6. *Three probable English allusions*. The poet makes much of three figures whose names would have set bells ringing in the minds of Anglo-Saxons. These are Hengest, the protagonist of a song that is performed to entertain the nobles in

[56] Andersson, 'Sources and Analogues', pp. 130–34 (esp. at p. 134). The Grettir/Beowulf connection has been the topic of extensive discussion and debate, as Andersson points out with reference to important studies by Axel Olrik, William W. Lawrence, Peter A. Jorgensen, Anatoly Liberman, J. Michael Stitt, and others. Magnús Fjalldal, *The Long Arm of Coincidence: The Frustrated Connection between Beowulf and Grettis Saga* (Toronto, 1998), finds this connection overstated, but numerous other scholars have found in these episodes a convincing link between Old English heroic legend and Old Icelandic saga literature. Robert Cook, 'Grettis saga', in *Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. by Pulsiano, pp. 241–43, presents an overview of the question.

[57] The claim that the action of the first two-thirds of *Beowulf* is based ultimately on a two-part folktale of very wide European distribution known as the 'Bear's Son' tale was argued by F. Panzer, *Studien zur germanischen Sagengeschichte*, vol. I: *Beowulf* (Munich, 1910). Panzer's argument is discriminatingly reviewed by Chambers (*Intro.*, pp. 369–81), with a helpful synopsis of individual versions of this tale. Chambers demonstrates that it is in those versions that have been collected in countries of the North Sea culture zone (including Iceland and the Faroe Islands) that one finds convincing parallels to *Beowulf*. The 'Bear's Son' tale figures in the standard system of folktale classification (the Aarne-Thompson index) as Type 301, 'The Three Stolen Princesses'; see Garmonsway and Simpson, pp. 331–32. J. Michael Stitt, *Beowulf and the Bear's Son: Epic, Saga, and Fairytale in Northern Germanic Tradition* (New York, 1992), offers a judicious discussion of this folkloric link and its ramifications in Old Icelandic saga literature.

Heorot after Beowulf's first victory (lines 1071–1159b); Offa, king of the Continental Angles, whom the poet goes out of his way to praise (lines 1945–62); and Wiglaf, the young warrior who ventures his life to go to the aid of Beowulf during the fight against the dragon. The role of each is worth inspection.

(a) The Hengest of the scop's song bears the same name as the Hengest (spelled alternatively 'Hengist' or 'Hengst') who, with his brother Horsa, was one of the fifth-century conquerors of Britain, in the legendary account of the origins of the English that is told by Bede and repeated in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the Old English Bede, and other sources.[58] This Hengest was honoured as the ancestor of the Kings of Kent and, in general, the most prominent among the Germanic leaders who won control over eastern Britain. Apart from these two contexts, 'Hengest' (steed) is not an attested proper name. While no date can be ascribed to the fight of the *Beowulf* poet's Hengest against Finn, king of the Frisians, that incident appears to pertain to a period of the heroic past that shortly precedes the poem's present action. To take this Hengest to be the Hengest of the migration myth seems only natural, and indeed virtually inevitable.[59] If the identity of these two figures is accepted, then the *Beowulf* poet tells us, at the first good opportunity, of how, after the death of a chieftain named Hnæf, this famous founding hero, a descendant of Woden and a founder of England,[60] came to become a

[58] Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking*, esp. pp. 49–71.

[59] For discussion of the question from two different perspectives, historical and mythological, see Anton Gerard van Hamel, 'Hengest and his Namesake', in *Studies in English Philology*, ed. by Malone and Ruud, pp. 159–71, and J. E. Turville-Petre, 'Hengest and Horsa', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, 14 (1953–57), 273–90. J. R. R. Tolkien, *Finn and Hengest: The Fragment and the Episode*, ed. by Alan Bliss (London, 1982), pp. 63–68, mounts a strong case that the two Hengests are the same, rightly claiming that 'it is not forcing the evidence, but following its most obvious leading, to identify the two Hengests' (p. 67). Similarly, E. G. Stanley, '"Hengestes Heap", Beowulf 1091', in *Britain, 400–600*, ed. by Bammesberger and Wollman, pp. 51–63, sees no reason to doubt the identity of the two Hengests. With good reason, he also resists the tendency to treat either one of them as a historical character. Anyone who doubts the equation of the two Hengests is invited to consult the convincing arguments of Th. Honegger, 'Hengest und Finn, Horsa', in *Realexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, 2nd edn, ed. by Herbert Jankuhn and others (Berlin, 1968–), XIV (1999), 386–91 (at pp. 389–90).

[60] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1:15; Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 50–51. I quote from the OE Bede, I, 52: 'Hengest ond Horsa [. . .] wæron Wihtgysses suna, þæs fæder wæs Witta haten, þæs fæder wæs Wihta haten ond þæs Wihta fæder wæs Woden nemned, of ðæs strynde monigra mægða cyningcynn fruman lædde' (Hengest and Horsa were sons of Wihtgils, whose father was called Witta, whose father was called Wihta, and the father of Wihta was named Woden, from whose stock the royal line of many tribes descended).

chieftain and how he confirmed his power by triumphing in a feud directed against the Frisians. It is surely significant that the Hengest of *Beowulf*, unlike his counterpart in other sources, is identified not as a Jute or as one of the Gēatas, as we would expect from our knowledge of Bede's history and its Old English translation, but rather as a 'Half-Dane' (1069a), if we take that tribal identification as referring to him as well as to Hnæf and their fellow-warriors. Here again, as with the merging of Danish and English royal genealogies through the figure of Scyld Scefing, we see an example of creative ethnicity that would have had a unifying effect in an Anglo-Scandinavian milieu, for both Danes and English-speakers could have taken pride in Hengest the 'Half-Dane' as an ancestral hero.

(b) The *Beowulf* poet's Offa (that is, Offa I, king of the Continental Angles), who is praised in such generous terms, bears the same name as the celebrated historical King Offa who ruled over Mercia from 757 to 796 (Offa II). In one charter that latter King is styled, with a good deal of hyperbole, *rex totius Anglorum patriae* 'king of the whole land of the English'. Even if this document is a tenth-century forgery,[61] it reflects the high esteem in which this powerful ruler was held in the generations after his death. Offa of Mercia traced his ancestry back to his namesake, Offa I, who governed a territory (much of the peninsula of Jutland) that eventually fell under Danish rule. In later times the Danes, too, honoured Offa I as an ancestral ruler and retold stories about him that they may have learned from English sources.[62] The *Beowulf* poet's extravagant praise of Offa I thus not only serves as a compliment to the Mercians, as often has been remarked.[63] It could also

[61] *Cartularium Saxonicum*, ed. by Walter de Gray Birch, 3 vols (London, 1885–93), I (1885), 302, no. 214. For discussion, see F. M. Stenton, 'The Supremacy of the Mercian Kings', *English Historical Review*, 32 (1918), 433–52, and Simon Keynes, 'Offa', in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, pp. 340–41 (at p. 341).

[62] Robert H. Hodgkin, *A History of the Anglo-Saxons*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1935), assumes that the Danes, in appropriating the province of Angeln, 'took over some of its Anglian folk-lore' (I, 31). The Danes' knowledge of English traditions concerning Offa of Angeln could also have come through Viking Age contacts, however.

[63] Whitelock, *Audience of Beowulf*, p. 63, calls attention to the significance of this allusion. More recently Newton, *Origins of Beowulf*, has turned a sceptical eye on the evidence bearing on this connection, pointing out that there was an obscure East Saxon king called Offa who seems to have abdicated around the year 709, and thus 'the Mercian royal family was not the only one in early Anglo-Saxon England which maintained a claim to descent from a legendary figure named Offa' (p. 69). While Newton's point is correct, one may still be confident that a tenth-century audience of *Beowulf* would have taken the poet's praise of Offa of Angeln as an oblique compliment to the only famous English king who bore that name, King Offa of Mercia, and not to persons of that name who had fallen into obscurity.

be taken to compliment the descendants of the Mercian royal line, which was assimilated into the West Saxon royal line through King Alfred's marriage to a Mercian princess named Ealhswith. Through her, Alfred's successors claimed descent from both Offas as well as a right to the former kingdom of Mercia.[64]

(c) The Wiglaf of *Beowulf* has no counterpart in early Germanic legendry. Perhaps significantly, however, he bears the name of a historical Mercian king, the Wiglaf who ruled from 827 to about 840 as the last independent King of Mercia before that realm fell under West Saxon domination. The *Beowulf* poet ascribes to his fictive Wiglaf a father named Wihstan and another ancestor named Wægmund. The historical Wiglaf had a grandson named Wihstan and a son named Wigmund. While the correspondence of names here does not match up in genealogical sequence, nor are the spellings exactly the same, the resemblance here amounts to more than the usual sort of alliterative chime between the names of blood-relations that one often finds in both poetry and history.[65] The collection of three such names in each of two families, one fictive and one historical, cannot be coincidence. While the quest for political allegory in *Beowulf* has always proven vain, the search for culturally significant allusion is another matter. Very possibly, the poet's invention of a conspicuously heroic character named 'Wiglaf', with these named ancestors, reinforces the oblique compliment to the royal family of the Mercians that many readers believe to be achieved by the poet's allusion to Offa I.

If the passage relating to Offa I does carry allusive force, then the poem dates from any time after Offa of Mercia stood in high repute. If, in addition, the Wiglaf passages draw on English history, then *Beowulf* in the form that we have it was composed no earlier than the lifetime of the historical King Wiglaf's grandson, or the late ninth century. By this time Mercia had been absorbed into a larger political unity ruled by the West Saxon royal line. When taken together with other evidence for dating, the Offa and Wiglaf passages point to a date for the composition of *Beowulf* no earlier than the end of the ninth century and very possibly sometime in the tenth. In this connection it is worth recalling that King Alfred's successors in the West Saxon royal line, who eventually ruled over all of England, claimed descent from both Offas, as well as a right to Mercia, through Alfred's marriage. The alliance of Mercia and Wessex that was thereby achieved

[64] Murray, '*Beowulf*, the Danish Invasions, and Royal Genealogy', p. 109.

[65] Alois Brandl, 'The *Beowulf* Epic and the Crisis in the Mercian Dynasty about the Year 700 AD', *Research and Progress*, 2 (1936), 195–203, and George Bond, 'Links between *Beowulf* and Mercian History', *SPh*, 40 (1943), 481–93, both make this connection, but in the context of arguments too speculative to command assent.

was the backbone of what, with allusion to those two peoples and their partial fusion, we today are accustomed to call 'Anglo-Saxon England'.[66]

7. *The role of the Gēatas*. This is the most curious of the poet's ethnic ascriptions, and it is notoriously difficult to construe intelligibly. It is also perhaps the most important of them, so that consideration of it is best undertaken in a separate section. Understanding it involves consideration of a cluster of sources that were coming together in and around the court of King Alfred the Great.

The Role of the Gēatas in the Geographical Mythology of the Anglo-Saxons

The poet specifies that the hero of the poem, Beowulf, like his uncle and king, Hygelac, whom he succeeds to the throne, is a member of the ruling class of the *Gēatas*, a name that is customarily translated 'Geats'. To what cultural questions is this tribal identification an answer? Few scholars have been concerned with this question of late. Most have accepted that the Old English tribal name *Gēatas* corresponds phonologically to the Old Norse tribal name *Gautar* (and to the modern Swedish tribal name *Götar*), have noted that in Old Norse sources the Gautar are said to inhabit the south central regions of modern Sweden, and have tended to leave the matter at that, with perhaps some speculative remarks concerning the date at which the Gautar were or were not absorbed into the Swedish nation and the possible connection of this historical event to the ending of *Beowulf*, with its predictions of tribal dissolution facing the Gēatas.[67] But this is by no means the end of the matter.

[66] During the Old English period the plural noun 'Anglo-Saxons' (OE *Ongel-Seaxones*, with different spellings; cf. Latin *Angli Saxones* or *Anglo Saxones*), generally denoted the English Saxons as opposed to their Old Saxon cousins. Later, beginning in the early modern period, that term came to denote the united people of England, whether of Anglian or Saxon descent. The rather complex history of this term is traced by Susan Reynolds, 'What Do We Mean by "Anglo-Saxon" and "Anglo-Saxons"?', *Journal of British Studies*, 24 (1985), 395–414.

[67] R. T. Farrell, *Beowulf, Swedes, and Geats* (London, 1972), makes his position clear from the start (p. 1): 'Two presumptions are basic. The first is that the *Geatas* are the *Gautar*, the inhabitants of south central Sweden, the area below the lakes Vänern and Vättern. The second is that *Beowulf* is a work of heroic history, i.e. a poem in which facts and chronology are subservient to the poet's interest in heroic deeds and their value in representing the ethics of an heroic civilization.' It is possible to endorse the second of these propositions, together with much else that is of value in Farrell's learned and informative book, without accepting the first. Philologists are correct in concluding that the name *Gēatas* corresponds phonologically to the name *Gautar*; nothing else can be taken for granted about this equivalency, which may or may not have been easy for the people of Anglo-Saxon England to make even if they knew of the Gautar by that name.

According to Bede's influential statement in book 1, chapter 15 of his *Ecclesiastical History*, Britain was settled by 'the three most powerful nations of Germany: that is, the Saxons, the Angles, and the Jutes'.[68] The first two of these tribal identifications present no difficulty, for the Saxons and the Angles were the two chief English-speaking peoples of Britain and each had been a powerful tribe in its Germanic homeland. The identity of the third people named by Bede — in Latin, the *Iuti* or *Iutae* — has long been a puzzle, both to modern scholars and, apparently, to the early English readers of Bede's history. When the *Historia ecclesiastica* was translated into English by someone working under the patronage of King Alfred, the translator renders the name of this third tribe as the *Gēatas* — a name that sounds vaguely like *Iuti* or *Iutae* but means something different.[69] This name, as Jane Leake has pointed out in a book with great potential impact on *Beowulf* scholarship,[70] is neither a miswriting, as has sometimes been thought, nor simply an 'error' on the part of King Alfred's translator, as R. W. Chambers takes it to be, thereby finding grounds to dismiss it from serious consideration.[71] If it were a scribal miswriting, as he acknowledges, it would not have appeared as such in two separate manuscripts representing two different scribal traditions. If it were the result of a mere mental lapse on the part of the translator, it would not be repeated in this same passage of the *Ecclesiastical History* where the translator refers to the land of the Engle (that is, the Continental Angles) as 'þæt land ðe

[68] 'Aduenerant autem de tribus Germaniae populis fortioribus, id est Saxonibus, Anglis, Iutis': Colgrave and Mynors, p. 50.

[69] 'Comon hi of þrim folcum ðam strangestan Germanie, þæt of Seaxum ond of Angle ond of Geatum' (They came from the three most powerful tribes of Germany, the Saxons, the Angles, and the Gēatas): the OE Bede, I, 52.

[70] Jane Acomb Leake, *The Geats of Beowulf: A Study in the Geographical Mythology of the Middle Ages* (Madison, 1967). Leake's book fell into obscurity during the years subsequent to its publication, partly as a result of the attacks on it made by reviewers with a different set of scholarly investments (see note 79 below). Its lack of influence among the next generation of scholars is indicated by the fact that it receives no discussion in Nicholas Howe's admired study *Migration and Mythmaking*, even though Howe's book, like Leake's, centrally addresses the theme of geographical mythology.

[71] See Leake's discussion of this point in *The Geats of Beowulf*, pp. 99–101. Leake anticipates some of the scholarship incorporated into the landmark 1981 book *The Dating of Beowulf* in that she accepts the possibility that *Beowulf* could be of ninth- or tenth-century composition and thus could be contemporary with the OE Bede, or somewhat later than it. Chambers's dismissal of the translator's work as an error, rather than an important instance of pseudo-history, is based in part on the assumption — scarcely tenable, these days — that the translator of Bede's *Historia* was working 'probably some two centuries after *Beowulf* was composed' (Chambers, *Intro.*, p. 337).

Angulus is nemned, betwyh Geatum ond Seaxum' (the land that is called Angeln (or Ongel), between the Gēatas and the Saxons).[72] Taken by itself, this remark seems no more than an obvious mistake, for the strong consensus among modern commentators is to locate the land of the Gēatas in the general region of south central Sweden — that is, in the land of the Gautar — rather than in the northern part of the peninsula of Jutland. Two such mistakes taken together, however, look like a pattern of comprehension, even if today we may regard that pattern as erroneous. What King Alfred's translator seems to have done in both these instances is to rationalize Bede's Latin *Historia* in the light of contemporary English pseudo-geographical and pseudo-historical lore. A crucial element of Anglo-Saxon mythmaking is at work here, though it has been largely ignored in the modern critical literature.[73]

As an expression of mythmaking, the translator's interpretation of Bede's history makes sense, for what the name 'Gēatas' seems to be (despite the anomalous vowel length)[74] is an anglicization of the Latin name 'Getae'. Evidence of the Anglo-Saxons' association of these two tribes is to be found in the anonymous seventh- or eighth-

[72] The OE Bede, I, 52.

[73] Although the argument that I raise here is not one that is addressed by Nicole Guenther Discenza in her article 'The Old English *Bede* and the Construction of Anglo-Saxon Authority', *ASE*, 31 (2002), 69–80, her thesis there — that the translator is a confident revisor who did some shaping of his source — is consistent with my approach. 'The Old English *Bede* transmits most of the material contained in the *Historia ecclesiastica*', she writes, 'yet it does not simply pass this material on, however much it may appear to do so; the translation does in fact supplant the Latin text and provides a means of access to their own history — now framed a little differently — to Anglo-Saxons who did not know Latin.' The OE Bede alters the meaning of 'English history', she writes, for in this translation, 'England itself is a land with a language, culture and history of its own' (p. 80). Discenza points out that regardless of differences of detail and emphasis that distinguish Bede's original history from its OE translation, 'Bede' is still quietly constructed 'as a reliable authority' in this late ninth-century revision of the English past.

[74] It is worth keeping in mind that the principles guiding medieval philology differed in important respects from those guiding nineteenth- and twentieth-century philology. Medieval philology was etymological in its foundations. Etymology, in turn, was generally based on superficial resemblances of sound, not on sound laws of the kind familiar to students of Grimm and Verner. This point is brought to bear on the topic of ethnonyms in Walter Pohl's study 'Ethnic Names and Identities in the British Isles: A Comparative Perspective', in *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. by John Hines (Woodbridge, 1997), pp. 7–32. Pohl points out that, in accord with the system of onomastic commentary developed by Isidore of Seville, 'many names were connected to those of other peoples purely because they sounded alike, like the Goths with the Getae' (pp. 16–17) — or, to swell this example somewhat, the Gēatas with the Getae with the Goths.

century Latin work known as the *Liber monstrorum*, a compendium of wonders, thought to be of English origin, that has much in common with two other texts found in the *Beowulf* manuscript.[75] In *Beowulf*, the hero's King Hygelac rules over the Gēatas and is said, in the poet's almost obsessive allusions to this famous incident,[76] to have met his death as a result of his taking part in a Viking-style raid at the mouth of the Rhine. The same man is introduced into the *Liber monstrorum* under the Latinized name of Higlacus. There, contrary to other sources,[77] he is said to have ruled over the Getae.[78] The Gēatas of *Beowulf* and the Getae of the *Liber monstrorum* seem thus to be conceived of as the same tribe, considered now in the English and now in the Latin form of its name.[79]

[75] L. G. Whitbread, 'The *Liber Monstrorum* and *Beowulf*', *Mediaeval Studies*, 36 (1974), 434–71, calls attention to the probable English origins of that work, and his conclusion is confirmed by Lapidge, '*Beowulf*, Aldhelm, the *Liber Monstrorum*, and Wessex'. For an edition of the *Liber monstrorum* together with extensive commentary, see Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 86–115 and 254–320, with discussion of a number of possible parallels to *Beowulf* at pp. 109–15. The two works in the *Beowulf* manuscript to which I allude are *The Wonders of the East* and *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* (see below).

[76] Lines 1202–14a, 2354b–59a, and 2914b–19a; cf. lines 2501–06a.

[77] Gregory of Tours calls him a Dane. The author of the *Gesta Francorum* calls him a Dane, although in one manuscript of that work he is called *rex Gotorum* 'king of the Goths' even though his warriors are called Danes; see Kemp Malone, 'The Identity of the *Geatas*', *Acta Philologica Scandinavica*, 4 (1929), 84–90 (at p. 90). Modern English translations of these passages are included in Garmonsway and Simpson, pp. 112–13; for both texts and translations, see Francis P. Magoun, Jr, 'Béowulf and King Hygelác in the Netherlands', *ES*, 35 (1954), 193–204. The King's name is spelled differently in the various sources in which he is mentioned, but that fact need not detain us here.

[78] 'Et fiunt monstra mirae magnitudinis, ut rex Higlacus, qui imperauit Getis et a Francis occisus est' (And there are monsters of an amazing size, like King Hygelac, who ruled the Getae [the Gēatas] and was killed by the Franks): *Liber monstrorum*, bk 1, ch. 2; Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, p. 258 (my translation). The name of the King's tribe, here given in the dative plural form *Getis*, appears elsewhere in the genitive plural as *Getorum* or *Getarum*, leaving other variants aside. Garmonsway and Simpson translate the name as 'Getae', while Orchard translates it as 'Geatas'; Magoun, 'Béowulf and King Hygelác in the Netherlands', consistently translates both 'Geti' and 'Géatas' as 'Gauts'.

[79] On this point, see the extended discussion by Leake, *The Geats of Beowulf*, pp. 98–133. Leake develops a suggestion that was made in brief by Elis Wadstein in 1933. The reader is referred to Leake's book for details of the complex argument that I accept here in its main features, despite some lingering questions about the historical Gautar and why Leake is relatively uninterested in them. There is no reason to refute the objections of G. V. Smithers in his review article

This pair of references connecting the Gēatas of *Beowulf* and the Getae of the *Liber monstrorum* and of a much more extensive Latin tradition is the lynchpin of Leake's thesis that the spatial setting of *Beowulf* represents a kind of geographical mythology. In early medieval thinking, as Leake has shown, the Getae were commonly regarded as a northern ancestral tribe from which a cluster of tribes of a historical character had derived. These putative descendants of the Getae included the Jutes as well as the Danes, the Goths, and the Gautar. The Getae stood in relation to these various tribes as an Ur-Germanic people of remarkable size and prowess. Their homeland was a great place for dragons, among such other marvellous creatures as the Amazons, cynocephali, anthropophagi, and sea-serpents — creatures that are given capsule descriptions in *The Wonders of the East*, a work that is copied out on folios 95^{v}–103^{v} of London, British Library, Cotton MSS, Vitellius A XV, shortly preceding the unique copy of *Beowulf*.[80] When the person who translated Bede's history into Old English interpreted Bede's *Iuti* or *Iutae* as the *Gēatas*, he seems to have drawn on this pseudo-historical lore. The translator thereby linked the three great Germanic tribes who were believed to have migrated to England (and who included the *Gēatas*, in this revisionist version of Bede's history) to the storied tribes of an imagined Continental *Heimat* whose parts radiated out from the 'central' province of Angeln.

Importantly, the same vein of pseudo-historical and pseudo-geographical lore that underlies this part of the Old English Bede can be seen in the Old English translation of Orosius's *Historiae adversum paganos*, a book that was produced in that same Alfredian milieu. Interpolated into Orosius's history is a passage that tells of the voyage of a Norwegian merchant named Ohthere (Old Norse *Óttarr*) from the port of what is here called *Sciringesheal* (medieval Kaupang), not far from modern Oslo, down the Kattegat to the port of Hedeby (here called *æt*

'The Geats in *Beowulf*', *Durham University Journal*, 63 (1971), 87–103, for most of his arguments have no relation to Leake's main point about geographical mythology. Kemp Malone's peremptory dismissal, on phonological grounds, of any identification of the Gēatas with the Getae also misses her point (see his review of Leake's book published in *Speculum*, 43 (1968), 736–39, and cf. his earlier study 'King Alfred's "Geats"', *MLR*, 20 (1925), 1–11). Even if on philological grounds the Anglo-Saxons should not have confused the Gēatas with the Getae (any more than such medieval authors as Orosius, Jordanes, and Isidore of Seville should have conflated the Getae and the Goths), the unmistakable evidence of *Beowulf* and the *Liber monstrorum* is that they did so, and so we must reckon with their creative ethnicity.

[80] For discussion of these manuscript relations, see Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, ch. 1, 'The *Beowulf*-Manuscript' (pp. 1–27), with discussion of *The Wonders of the East* (also known as *The Marvels of the East*) at pp. 18–27.

Hæðum), at the base of the peninsula of Jutland. To the despair of modern geographers, Ohthere twice refers to Jutland (perhaps meaning only northern Jutland) as 'Gotland' — that is, 'land of the Goths'. The passage in which he does so is worth quoting in full, seeing that it is crucial to our understanding of the Anglo-Saxon geographical imagination and yet is regularly either ignored or argued away by modern scholars.[81]

In studying this passage, the reader may wish to refer to the map included as Figure 4 below (at p. 137) as well as to a facsimile of the middle part of London, British Library, Cotton MSS, Tiberius B I, fol 13^{v} (Figure 1). Ohthere is imagined to be speaking, in words that have the appearance of having been taken down at King Alfred's court. At some point his words, translated into smooth English and collated with some other information available to the compiler, were added to the Old English Orosius so as to bring that work more up to date in regard to its account of northern geography:

> Wið suðan þone Sciringesheal fylð swyðe micel sæ up in on ðæt land, seo is bradre þonne ænig man ofer seon mæge, ond is Gotland on oðre healfe ongean ond siðða[n] Sillende. Seo sæ lið mænig hund mila up in on þæt land. Ond of Sciringesheale he cwæð þæt he seglode on fif dagan to þæm porte þe mon hæt æt Hæþum, se stent betuh Winedum ond Seaxum ond Angle ond hyrð in on Dene. Ða he þiderweard seglode fram Sciringesheale, þa wæs him on þæt bæcbord Denamearc ond on þæt steorbord widsæ þry dagas; ond þa, twegen dagas ær he to Hæþum come, him wæs on þæt steorbord Gotland ond Sillende ond iglanda fela — on þæm landum eardodon Engle, ær hi hider on land coman — ond hym wæs ða twegen dagas on ðæt bæcbord þa igland þe in Denemearce hyrað.[82]
>
> (To the south of Sciringesheal the land is penetrated by a very big sea that is too wide to see across. Gotland is on the other side of it, and after that Sillende. The sea extends into the land for many hundred miles. And he [Ohthere] said that from Sciringesheal, he sailed in five days to the port that is called Hedeby, which is situated among Wends and Saxons and Angles and is subject to the Danes. When he sailed there from Sciringesheal,

[81] Malone, 'King Alfred's "Geats"', and 'King Alfred's "Gōtland"', *MLR*, 23 (1928), 336–39, believes that what Ohthere would actually have said, as a speaker of Old Norse, was *Gautland*, and that this word was misconstrued as *Gotland*. He would emend away 'Gotland' without considering the possibility that, as an instance of pseudo-geography emanating from the court of King Alfred, that name contributes to an emergent sense of (or desire for) Gothic connections among members of the West Saxon court society. For discussion of the OE name 'Gotland' for Jutland and its probable derivation from the ON name *Jótland*, see Matthew Townend, *Language and History in Viking Age England*, Studies in the Early Middle Ages, 6 (Turnhout, 2002), pp. 102–03.

[82] The OE Orosius, p. 16, lines 9–20. The passage is also printed, with a different modern English translation, in *Two Voyagers at the Court of King Alfred*, ed. by Niels Lund and trans. by Christine E. Fell (York, 1984), p. 22.

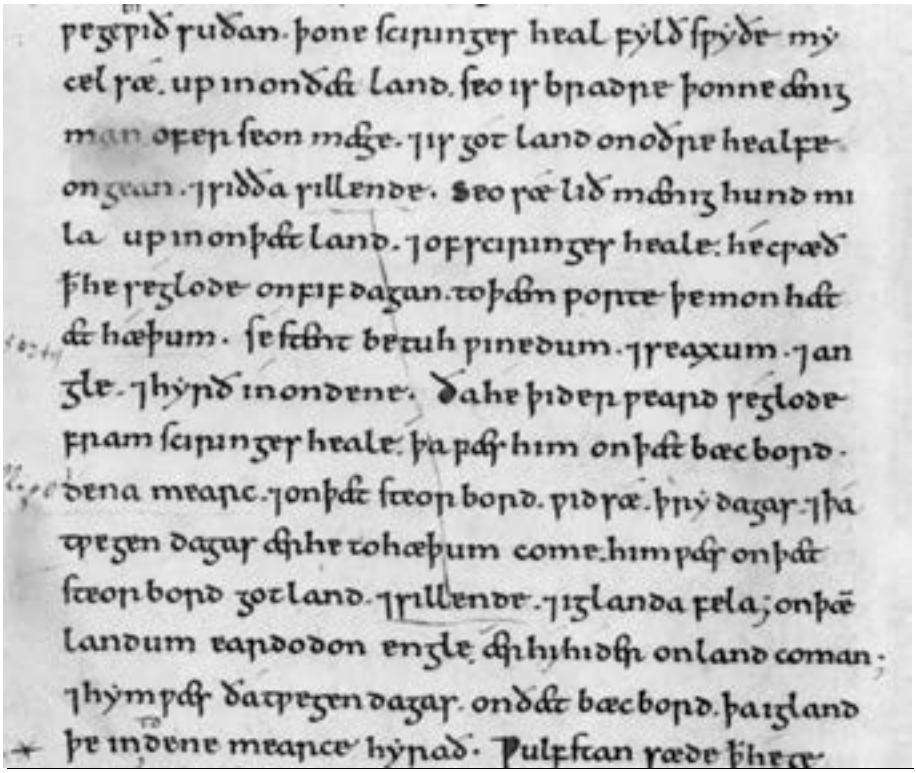

Figure 1. Ohthere's account of his travels in the region of Jutland. London, British Library, Cotton MSS, Tiberius B I, fol. 13^{v} (detail).

> Denmark was on his port side and there was open sea on his starboard for three days; and then, two days before he arrived at Hedeby, Gotland and Sillende and many islands were on his starboard. The Angles lived in those lands before they settled this land. And for two days, on his port side, were the islands that belong to Denmark.)

'Gotland' in this passage refers to Jutland (or its northern parts), while 'Sillende', thought by some to refer to south Jutland, probably denotes the island of Zealand.[83] This passage seems to have been interpolated into Orosius's history because it represented the best knowledge that was available to the Anglo-Saxons of King Alfred's day concerning the geography of the region of Denmark. Since the language of this passage is standard West Saxon and Ohthere is unlikely to have spoken that tongue fluently, the place-names that figure in this passage are

[83] For discussion of the disputed meaning of 'Sillende' see p. 140 below.

not likely to be the ones that Ohthere used when speaking to his interlocutor (who is said to be King Alfred himself). What we are reading here therefore represents what the people who took down his words understood him to have said. The point to keep in mind is that when the book containing these additions was published at Alfred's court, it reflected the thinking of that milieu. Its contents must have been authorized. Even though modern scholars may rebel at the idea of a 'Gotland' situated in north Jutland, thus providing a more westerly outpost of 'greater Gothia' than is known from other sources as well as a springboard from which the Gēatas are imagined to have crossed over to Britain,[84] we will not succeed in entering the thought-world of the people of the later Anglo-Saxon period (and with it, I believe, the intellectual matrix in which *Beowulf* arose in the form in which we have it) unless we accept this passage as 'genuine pseudo-geography'. What I mean by that term is that the passage reflects actual Anglo-Saxon perceptions of their homeland and their ethnic origins, even if today we may regard those perceptions as misguided.

In sum, Anglo-Saxon authors seem easily to have conflated Jutes and Gēatas, Gēatas and Getae, Getae and Goths, Goths of Jutland with Goths thought to be associated with other parts of the Baltic Sea culture zone. While they had a clear idea of who the Angles and Saxons were, they struggled hard to comprehend who the 'third great tribe' could have been that conquered Roman Britain, according to Bede's famous account. By the time of King Alfred's reign, their tendency was to associate that people (via the Gēatas) with the ancient and honourable tribe of the Goths, not with latter-day Jutes of lesser stature.

The Anglo-Saxons' somewhat desperate efforts to firm up their genealogical credentials and to map out the land from which a subgroup of the Gothic race migrated to England have made it exceedingly difficult for present-day scholars to discern what their basic concept was of the ethnic geography of their homeland, if indeed they had a single concept of that homeland rather than a bundle of competing ideas. Amidst the tangled threads that make up this knot of pseudo-history and surmise, what is clear is that all these 'Gothic' peoples, whatever their exact filiations were imagined to be, were thought of as formerly inhabiting regions that lay to the north and to the east of Angeln, the Continental homeland of the Engle. The Gothic peoples thus also lived to the north and to the east of the

[84] The island of Gotland is named in this same section of the OE Orosius at p. 16, line 28. There are thus two Gotlands, according to the information presented here. Both are included on the map included at p. 137 below, which in this respect agrees with the map included in *Two Voyagers at the Court of King Alfred*, ed. by Lund and trans. by Fell, pp. 26–27.

Danes. The Goths, of course, were a people on the go. According to legendary history, branches of the Gothic race, after their original putative migration from Scandinavia (as reported by Jordanes),[85] settled in regions as diverse and far-flung as Spain, Italy, the Black Sea coast, and the Caspian Sea coast, there to carve out kingdoms for themselves with a good cash-flow based on their conquest of former Roman territories. The presence of Goths in Jutland, or for that matter in fifth-century Britain itself, would not have seemed out of character.

As for the Getae, they cannot be pinned down to any discrete geographical area. Modern scholars tend to locate their almost equally shadowy alter-egos, the tribe that the poets of *Beowulf* and *Widsith* refer to as the Gēatas, somewhere in southern Sweden (in Västergötland or Östergötland, or both those areas) on the grounds that the Gautar (a name cognate with 'Gēatas') inhabited those regions. In *Beowulf*, the homeland of the Gēatas is imagined to be situated a distance of one day's sail from the royal seat of the Scylding (or Skjöldung) kings, which is traditionally located at Lejre, a few miles south-west of the modern city of Roskilde, Zealand.[86]

It is not my purpose, however, to engage with the questions of real-world geography that are of pressing concern either to medievalist historians, with their understandable need for facts, or to adventurous scholars who spend their summers attempting to follow in the wake of Beowulf and his band of Gēatas, rather like certain classicists of the modern era who have sailed out in search of Odysseus's exact route home to Ithaca from Troy, cruising unscathed past the Cyclops' cave and the Sirens' rock.[87] Instead, I wish to cast light on the value of *Beowulf* as a pseudo-historical source. Considered as such, the poem makes a

[85] See below, pp. 114–15, for discussion of this idea, which appears to be Jordanes' invention.

[86] The association of the Skjöldung kings with Lejre will be discussed from many perspectives in a book, *Beowulf and Lejre*, to be published *c.* 2006 by the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies. This will include, among translations of all the major legendary sources bearing on Lejre, English translations of reports on recent excavations that have revealed the existence of three great halls built there in succession. The first of these appears to date from the mid-sixth century, the second from the late seventh century, and the third from the late ninth century.

[87] I do not wish to make more than a gentle dig at the ambitions of Gillian R. Overing and Marijane Osborn in their intriguing book *Landscape of Desire: Partial Stories of the Medieval Scandinavian World* (Minneapolis, 1994). Osborn's attempt to map the physical geography of *Beowulf* (and, in particular, to locate the real-world site of Beowulf's Barrow in the region of Bohuslän, Västergötland) is a model of careful scholarship in which a 'living history' project is undertaken with a nuanced awareness of the interdependency of the knower and the known.

significant contribution to a history of ideas that cannot be charted with reference only to canonical authors writing in Latin, for it is chiefly embodied in sources that are marginal or popular in nature. Specifically, the poem contributes to the myth of migration that, after first being stated by Bede, became one of the Anglo-Saxons' controlling ideas. The poem is of exceptional interest for the way it embodies, in narrative form, ideas about the ethnic origins of the English that were in circulation in conjunction with the Alfredian educational reform.

Like many another literary work that has come into being during a period of ethnic conflict and integration, the poem shows the influence of changing conceptions of the past and, indeed, of physical geography. By making his hero a Geat, the *Beowulf* poet sheds lustre on the English as putative descendants of the Gēatas, a tribe easily conflated with the Getae and with the Goths, as well. Through his narrative of fabulous adventures set in ancient Scandinavia, the poet gives the semblance of flesh-and-blood character to the Gēatas, a tribe whom the English of King Alfred's day viewed as ancestral but concerning whom they had no well-developed traditions.[88] By characterizing the four leading Gēatas who have a role to play in the poem as persons of impressive moral character and, with regard to the men, as fearless and indeed awesome warriors,[89] the poet also makes clear how

[88] As is well known, a prehistoric king named Geat (or Geata, or Geatt; other spellings occur as well) is listed in the royal pseudo-genealogies that are incorporated, with some variations, into the different recensions of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as well as into Asser's *Life of King Alfred* and Æthelweard's *Chronicon* (see Klaeber, pp. 254–55, for summary information). This fact might seem to indicate that the Anglo-Saxons had some traditions about the Gēatas, assuming that Geat is the eponymous ancestor of that tribe. But apart from an obscure reference in the poem known as *Deor* that may conceivably refer to that King's restless love life (see below, pp. 172–73), there are no stories about 'Geat' that come down to us, nor are the Gēatas mentioned in the vernacular literature of Anglo-Saxon England other than in *Beowulf* and in one line of *Widsith*. The assumption that the *Beowulf* poet was perpetuating ancient lore about the Gēatas thus has little to support it. As for 'King Geat', he may well be no more than a name, possibly borrowed from the 'Gapt' mentioned by Jordanes. For discussion of that name in the context of Anglo-Saxon mythmaking, see R. D. Fulk, 'Myth in Historical Perspective: The Case of Pagan Deities in the Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies', in *Myth: A New Symposium*, ed. by Gregory Schrempp and William Hansen (Bloomington, 2002), pp. 225–39 (at pp. 231–32).

[89] I refer to King Hygelac and his wife Queen Hygd, to the hero's younger kinsman Wiglaf, and to Beowulf himself. The poet distinguishes these characters in regard to their virtues. Hygelac is a figure of strength and magnanimity rather than wisdom; Hygd is all that a gracious queen should be. Wiglaf is held up for admiration more for his moral character than for physical strength. Beowulf is thought by many readers to unite a wide range of virtues (even in regard to his kindness or graciousness, qualities that the poet emphasizes at the end of the poem), even though his wisdom in old age has been a perennial topic of critical debate.

different the people of Anglo-Saxon England had become — whether wiser, or simply diminished — from their grand and sometimes terrible northern ancestors.

Patronage and Text-Making

To return to the question of dating that was my point of departure in the previous section, these are persuasive reasons for entertaining a date for the composition of *Beowulf* in its present form sometime during the tenth century, after the troubles of the first Viking Age had subsided and after King Afred had embarked upon his programme of educational reform. No one of these reasons should be taken to be conclusive. Taken together, however, they point to a date for the composition of *Beowulf*, as we now have it, not earlier than the time when Alfred laid the foundations of a united England. If an educated guess is permitted, I would interpret the cumulative evidence that is summarized in the preceding paragraphs as suggesting a date for that poem no earlier than the reign of Alfred's grandson Æthelstan, who was chosen king by both Mercians and West Saxons in 924 and whose prosperous rule, like that of his successors up to the middle years of the reign of King Æthelred the Unready (978–1016), seems to have been based on a policy of integrating ethnic Angles, ethnic Saxons, and ethnic Danes into a single people. The creative ethnicity with which the poet manipulates his source materials makes sense in this early and mid-tenth-century context as an expression of the ideology of nationhood that was emergent at that time. Moreover, the poem may have had a role in shaping that ideology. Certainly the effect of this fictive narrative is to clarify the identity of the English by dramatizing the interactions of Danes (their ancestral cousins) and Gēatas (supposedly one of their founding tribes) in the shadowy northern landscape of *Beowulf*.

The question remains: why did someone, or why did some group of people, decide to go to the trouble and expense of committing to parchment what might seem, by strict devotional standards, a fairly 'useless', 'secular' poem like *Beowulf*?[90]

[90] The term 'secular', problematic when used in relation to almost any feature of medieval life, is particularly so when applied to *Beowulf*, a poem celebrating a pagan hero who acts very much like a Christian. Wormald, 'Bede, *Beowulf*, and the Conversion', answers the question 'Why was Beowulf preserved?' in his own way based on his twin assumptions that the poem is pre-Alfredian and was written by a literate member of the clergy. Here I present a different possibility based on the hypothesis that the text of *Beowulf* has a close relation to Anglo-Saxon oral tradition.

Looking just at the question of how such a work was written down, there are three possibilities. These can be summarized as follows.[91] (1) *Intervention by an outsider*, or the collection, by a person skilled in the use of letters, of a poem that was normally performed aloud for a listening audience. (2) *Intervention by an insider*, or the writing down of the text by a poet who was both skilled in the art of oral composition and competent in the technology of script. (3) *Literary imitation*, or deliberate composition by a learned person in a manner that is meant to recall the oral, traditional style.

Present scholarly opinion seems to favour either the second or the third of these alternatives. Personally I find the third one unattractive for reasons similar to those advanced by Edward B. Irving, Jr, who has shown good stylistic and aesthetic grounds for reading *Beowulf* not as a lettered work sprinkled with oral formulas but rather as 'a most distinguished descendant of a long and skillful oral tradition'.[92] If the view shared by Irving and myself is correct, then the poet was capable of working fluently *in* the tradition of oral heroic narrative rather than parroting a few of its characteristic features. Elsewhere I have written concerning the poet's fluency in his stylized poetic medium, and the reader is invited to review those arguments for what they are worth.[93]

Although I would not rule out the second alternative, 'intervention by an insider', I find it less than wholly attractive. The manifest differences in subject, style, known sources, authorial voice, and artistic achievement between *Beowulf* and Old English works that are obviously of learned provenance, such as the signed poems of Cynewulf, leave me sceptical of this approach. Cynewulf was certainly lettered, and to judge from his competence in highly ornamental formulaic diction he may well have had some acquaintance with the oral poetic tradition as well; but those dual accomplishments did not make him a master poet comparable

[91] The following paragraphs represent a distillation of an argument that I present in 'Understanding Beowulf: Oral Poetry Acts', *Journal of American Folklore*, 106 (1993), 131–55, revised as ch. 4 of *Homo Narrans* (pp. 89–119). The reader is referred to that chapter for details concerning works and collectors to which no more than passing allusion is made here, as well as for additional examples of the recording of epic-length texts through a process of oral dictation.

[92] Edward B. Irving, Jr, *Rereading Beowulf* (Philadelphia, 1989), p. 2. Irving has cast his considerable authority behind the idea of an oral-derived *Beowulf*, and he uses this idea to make sense of many formal and aesthetic features of the poem. He prefers not to engage, however, with the issue of how the material text of *Beowulf* came into being, and his reticence in that regard leaves some room for the following discussion.

[93] Niles, *Beowulf: The Poem and its Tradition*, esp. ch. 5 ('Formula and Formulaic Diction', pp. 121–37) and ch. 6 ('Compound Diction', pp. 138–51).

to the *Beowulf* poet. Contrary to what persons trained in the literate arts might expect, a knowledge of reading and writing does not necessarily make an oral poet or storyteller become better at what he does. A masterful singer of tales, even if literate, does not need to rely on books to compose effectively before a live audience any more than a skilled jazz musician, even if musically literate, needs to rely on sheet music in order to improvise brilliantly before a listening audience.

Instead, I would suggest that the first possibility, that of oral dictation — the model of Cædmon and the monks of Whitby, transposed into a secular key — may be the most likely of the three. This suggestion parallels Albert B. Lord's claims in regard to the poems of Homer, in an informative article based on his field studies of oral poets from the Balkans.[94]

In a society where oral poetry is the norm, those poets who live within the tradition feel little impulse to write their songs or stories down. The impulse to take down poems in writing comes chiefly from outside the oral culture, when another interested party happens upon the scene. The texts that result from these self-conscious attempts to sponsor performances of poetry for the sake of generating good written texts could be called 'transmutations' of the poetry, to adapt a term that Roman Jakobson has used to refer to intersemiotic translation from one sign system into another.[95] Such texts render a stream of syllables meant to be heard out loud into a script that is meant for the eyes of literate people, who then do with such texts what they will. Examples of texts that result from the transmutation of an oral tradition are to be found throughout the literature of modern cultural anthropology, anthropological linguistics, and folklore. One may think of the work of the social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski among the

[94] See Albert Bates Lord, 'Homer's Originality: Oral Dictated Texts', *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 84 (1953), 124–34, repr. with slight revisions in his *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition*, pp. 38–48.

[95] An excellent account of the practical editorial processes that are involved in the 'intersemiotic translation' of oral epic poetry into printed editions is given by the German folklorist and medievalist Karl Reichl, 'Silencing the Voice of the Singer: Problems and Strategies in the Editing of Turkic Oral Epics', in *Textualization of Oral Epics*, ed. by Honko, pp. 103–27. Also in this connection note Elizabeth C. Fine, *The Folklore Text: From Performance to Print* (Bloomington, 1984). Fine is sympathetic to the ethnopoetics movement, which seeks to maximize the trace of orality in the printed text, as is discussed by Thomas A. DuBois, 'Ethnopoetics', in *Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, pp. 256–57. I agree with Reichl in finding the goals of this movement admirable in principle and yet often irrelevant in practice, given the existence of sound-recording technology that can reproduce the contours of the human voice with much greater fidelity than print can ever do.

Trobriand Islanders of the south Pacific, or of the linguist Edward Sapir among California Indians, or of fieldworkers working for the Irish Folklore Commission in the western counties of Ireland, or of Cecil Sharp collecting English folksongs among rural singers both in Somerset, England, and in the region of the Southern Appalachians in North America. Examples could be multiplied. Some epic poetry that has been published in recent years also falls within this category. The Finnish *Kalevala*, the Serbo-Croatian song *The Wedding of Smailagić Meho*, and *The Mwindo Epic* from central Africa certainly result from such a process of self-conscious collection, combined in the Finnish instance with a significant amount of rewriting. Some classicists, though far from all of them, follow Lord in believing that the Homeric epics must be the result of a similar process of collection and reworking. However hypothetical this suggestion must remain, it is a plausible one, and the length and artistic excellence of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* do not count against it.

Texts that result from an outsider's sympathetic engagement with an oral tradition, though highly mediated, are often long and of high quality, for they represent the collaborative efforts of a painstaking collector and the most gifted informants who can be found: the Medjedovićs and Williamsons of an oral tradition, as it were. If all goes well, the text that results from such an act of collaboration will be a 'best' text that showcases the poet's talents.[96] It is often more complex, or more fully elaborated, or more clear and self-consistent in its narrative line than a verbatim record of a primary oral performance would be, for it is the result of a purposeful effort to obtain an impressive text that literate people will want to read. The editor of *The Mwindo Epic*, Daniel Biebuyck, notes that the version of this poem that he prints in his 1969 edition, and that he recorded from dictation, was not only by far the longest one he heard performed in the country of the Nyanga. It was also 'the most comprehensive, most coherent, most detailed, and most poetic' of them all.[97] This is a version that Biebuyck specially commissioned, to the surprise of the poet, who was not accustomed to singing the episodes of this story as a continuous whole.

[96] The adjective 'best' refers, of course, to the collector's perspective, which represents that of the literate society. It is worth remembering that the collector's 'best' text may be of no use whatever to some members of the original audience, though other members of that audience may wish to make use of it.

[97] *The Mwindo Epic from the Banyanga*, ed. by Daniel Biebuyck and Kahombo C. Mateene (Berkeley, 1969), p. 19.

If my hypothesis carries weight, then the *Beowulf* poet was a master of the aristocratic oral tradition who, in like manner, was enlisted in an effort to reify this poem in the form of a material text. What launched the material text into its existence was then what can be called an *oral poetry act*. This term deserves brief clarification.

An oral poetry act is what happens when a collector asks a singer to perform a work not in its natural context, but rather in some special setting in the presence of a scribe, or a team of scribes, or a tape recorder, or some other secondary audience. The collector thus becomes a third factor in shaping the poem, after the poet and the primary oral audience, for he or she too has influence over what is performed. Like the Abbess Hild and the monks at Whitby, the collector usually has a certain kind of poem in mind and may be indifferent to other 'irrelevant' kinds. He can specify whether the poem is to be a 'bare bones' version or a fully elaborated one. He may ask the poet to emphasize certain aspects of his work and downplay others. Whether or not the collector has a clear agenda, the poet naturally wishes to please that person, especially if the poet is a professional artist who expects to be rewarded in money or esteem. Performers who are not mere memorizers are accustomed to colouring the substance of a story (including lengthening or shortening it) so as to suit the tastes or appetites of a particular audience, and they are unlikely to forego that habit for no good reason.

In these ways and in many others, the presence of the collector affects the product of the oral poetry act. At first, this is a 'scratch' version of the poem as it can be read by a textual community — that is, by a group of readers who may or may not have much competence in the oral tradition, but who participate in an ongoing discourse about books.[98] If, later, a text of that work comes to be distributed more widely, it will naturally be improved in ways that accord with the aims of the collector, the imagined needs or desires of readers, and the general conventions of written literature in the society in which it will be read. The metre may be smoothed out. Rhyme or other technical features may be made more

[98] I adapt the notion of textual community from Stock, *Listening for the Text*, using 'textual' in a more narrow sense to refer to the products of writing. The notion of literary competence, drawn from the concept of linguistic competence, has been discussed by Jonathan Culler, 'Literary Competence', in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. by Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore, 1981), pp. 101–17. Oral heroic poetry is only a forceful instance of the general phenomenon whereby literature is made intelligible through systems of convention that make understanding possible. For discussion of how the members of Anglo-Saxon textual communities may have had some competence in oral poetry, see Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse* (Cambridge, 1990).

perfect. Non-standard or dialect forms may be replaced with standard ones or may be made more consistent. Gaps in the story may be filled in, errors or inconsistencies corrected, and useless fillers deleted. Capital letters and punctuation may be added, lineation imposed, and sectional divisions introduced. From beginning to end of this process of textualization, the collector thus becomes a collaborator in the act of poetry, not just a recorder of it. As the inventor of the text as it can be read in 'hard copy', the collector makes myriad choices, whether consciously or unconsciously, that determine the character and readability of the product of his or her intervention into the realm of oral performance.

If this hypothesis is valid, then we do not have to read *Beowulf* as a literate island in a sea of much inferior oral poetry. Neither need it be read as the unmediated gift of an oral poet's inspiration. Rather, it can be regarded as a *tertium quid*: a third type of creation, a unique hybrid that came into being at the interface of orality and literacy through some unknown sponsor's prompting and a subsequent process of textualization. The important thing to keep in mind is that, like virtually all written records of an oral tradition,[99] the text of *Beowulf* would have been taken down outside the normal context of performance, in a situation where one or more outsiders were involved.

It would be of little use, however, to make specific suggestions as to who first wrote down the text of *Beowulf*, when, on what occasion. To the question 'Why was the text of *Beowulf* written down?' perhaps only one good answer can be given, a negative one: 'Why not?' By the end of the seventh century, the technology of writing down long poems was well in place in England. Literary models were there, in the form of Latin works like the *Aeneid* as well as vernacular ones like Cædmon's biblical paraphrases. The important question to ask, perhaps, is 'By what time did the reasons for *not* writing down a nominally secular poem like *Beowulf* lose their force?'

As far as one can judge, ecclesiastical opposition to poems about pagan antiquity seems to have cooled by the last years of the reign of King Alfred and the early years of the tenth century, roughly speaking.[100] Opinion about the Germanic past had shifted, so that reference to pagan ancestors no longer seemed either threatening or irrelevant. In a parallel development, songs about the pagan past had become infused with Christian values. Only after these momentous shifts of mentality had occurred, I suspect, did someone in a position of power see fit to preserve the poem that we call *Beowulf* by recording it in writing.

[99] As is emphasized by Goody, *Interface Between the Written and the Oral*, p. xi.

[100] This is a point made by Frank, '*Beowulf* Poet's Sense of History'.

Besides orienting the poem toward a Christian textual community, this person seems to have had some awareness of being part of that new order that we now call the English nation. In company with other like-minded people, that patron knew or intuited that the ideology of Anglo-Saxon nationhood could be legitimized in mythic terms through invocation of a common, pseudo-Christian, Anglo-Danish past. In a period when books, like other works of art, served as tools of social order and manifestations of authority, many people could look favourably on a book that legitimized Anglo-Saxon institutions of kingship and thegnship, confirmed Christian ideals of sacrifice, and promoted a common culture among the English and the Danes, all through a fabulous tale set in the heroic north.

In sum, those persons who hope to locate *Beowulf* in literary history should take account of the twin possibilities of a tenth-century date and of that fusion of oral and literary cultures — of *giedd* 'song' and *stæf-cræft* 'writing' — that I have called an oral poetry act. In raising these possibilities, I do not claim to invalidate other approaches to the poem's date and place in literary history.[101] At most, I only hope to render such alternatives relatively less attractive. As the cultural theorist Fredric Jameson has remarked, 'Only another, stronger interpretation can overthrow and practically refute an interpretation already in place'.[102]

[101] See Joseph Harris, '*Beowulf* in Literary History', *Pacific Coast Philology*, 17 (1982), 16–23, repr. in *Interpretations of Beowulf*, ed. by R. D. Fulk (Bloomington, 1991), pp. 235–41, and 'Beowulf as Epic', *Oral Tradition*, 15 (2000), 159–69. Harris advances the attractive argument that, like the *Canterbury Tales*, what *Beowulf* represents is a *summa litterarum* — that is, a self-consciously retrospective synthesis of all the main literary genres known at its time. While his argument may be found persuasive if one starts from the assumption of a literary *Beowulf*, my own work is based on different assumptions, as has been stated. In addition, for reasons that have been set forth above, I tend to favour a later date of composition for *Beowulf* than Harris, who is inclined to associate the poem with the Mercian court of King Offa or one of that King's immediate successors. While *Beowulf* may well represent a self-conscious attempt at poetry composed in a capacious style, its synthesis of various genres appears to be characteristic of poetry of epic dimensions. As Albert B. Lord has noted in *The Singer Resumes the Tale* (Ithaca, NY, 1995), p. 111, oral epic poetry typically incorporates within itself a wide range of materials (such as gnomic pronouncements, laments, and short heroic narratives) that could also, in different circumstances, be performed as free-standing items. Seen from this perspective, 'epic' is a super-genre with an innate capacity to subsume virtually any other traditional genre.

[102] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY, 1981), p. 13.

Toward a Social Beowulf

One of the tasks of current Old English scholarship is the Jamesonian one of unmasking *Beowulf* as a socially symbolic act. Although its action is set in fifth- and sixth-century Scandinavia, the poem articulates a response to the two great sources of tension in English culture leading up to the mid-tenth century: namely, the synthesis of Germanic culture and Christian faith into a single system of thought and ethics, and the integration of all the peoples who were living south of Hadrian's Wall and east of Offa's Dyke into one English nation ruled by the West Saxon royal line.

Whether or not literature in general is produced through one or more ideological contradictions (as some modern theorists have held), it seems likely that *Beowulf* is the result of two major conflicts, each one of which was a cause of lively concern to the people of England during the later Anglo-Saxon period. They can be paraphrased as follows. (1) 'Our ancestors were great noblemen; our ancestors are damned.' The first attitude could not simply be cast aside when Christian missionaries arrived to teach the need of salvation through Christ. *Beowulf* reveals a profound disquiet in regard to the orthodox doctrine that anyone not baptized into the faith is beyond redemption. (2) 'The Danes are murderers and damnable heathens; the Danes are our trusted allies.' The first attitude could not die out as soon as descendants of the early Viking invaders began to farm the land in peace, so that the second view could be safely announced. *Beowulf* shows how the public policy of honouring the Danes and integrating their traditions with English ones was mingled with popular memories of a heathen people who had done their best to ravage English society and its centres of religion and learning. The poet's evocations of the magnificence of Hrothgar's court alternate with allusions to the damned rites that some of the Danes practise there (175–88), as well as to Danish acts of fratricidal violence.

To put the matter a different way, we might say that when viewed in terms of its own culture, *Beowulf* is the projection of two great desires: first, for a distinguished ethnic origin that would serve to merge Angles, Saxons, and Danes into a single more-or-less united people, and second, for an ethical origin that would ally this unified race with Christian spiritual values. No matter that the heroes of Beowulf's day were unbaptized pagans. Of their own free will, exercising the God-given power of reason, they recognized the controlling power of Providence in human affairs and had the wisdom and fortitude to fight against God's enemies on earth — or at least the more enlightened ones among them did, according to the poet's audacious fiction.

If this view of its place in literary history is correct — and I must beg forgiveness for repeating this hedging rhetoric, for certainty in such matters remains beyond our grasp — then for all its fantastic elements, *Beowulf* was a vehicle for political work in a time when the various peoples south of Hadrian's Wall were being assimilated into an emergent English nation. 'Political' is perhaps too narrow a term for the work the poem does, for in reinventing the ancestral past in the light of Christian doctrine and the Danish presence, as well as in articulating a system of values appropriate to this task, the poem is a site where cultural issues of great magnitude and complexity are contested. Some of these issues, particularly the ones that involve the deadly opposition of the hero versus the Grendel-kin, doubtless transcend the historical tensions of any one era and connect with bedrock contradictions that underlie civilization itself and its inevitable discontents.

To read *Beowulf* as I am suggesting is to read it as an exemplary specimen of the art of *Homo narrans*. This is an art that has received much scrutiny in recent years. As Jay Mechling, a noted folklorist and American Studies specialist, has pointed out,

> Many respectable scholars, some of them giants in their specialties, have turned away from positivist and formalist epistemologies to an epistemology that sees reality as created, mediated, and sustained by human narratives. To accept this view is also to see that narratives are emergent, contingent, public, and contested; that they reflect interests (such as class, gender, race, age) and, therefore, that they are ideological and political, even when they seem not to be.[103]

In keeping with this socially embedded way of looking at narrative, I suggest that *Beowulf* did much ideological work in its time. To be precise, we should not speak of this work as being done by any one individual poem, but rather by its discourse, taking that discourse as the sum total of poetic impulses of this kind, whether voiced aloud or written down.

Thanks to the accidents of transmission that have affected all early medieval literature and that have tended to filter out 'useless' works and unadorned manuscripts at every stage, *Beowulf* comes down to us as a unique creation. Other works like it that may once have existed — oral narratives featuring Waldere, Ingeld, Hengest, Hygelac, Hama, and similar figures — are known only in fragmentary form or can only be inferred through scattered, allusive references. Still, the poem serves as an example, the only one that has happened to survive almost intact, of a type of narrative literature that probably retained cultural centrality until fairly late in the Anglo-Saxon period, bearing the intellectual brunt of such changes in

[103] Jay Mechling, '*Homo Narrans* Across the Disciplines', *Western Folklore*, 50 (1991), 41–51 (p. 43).

society as occurred over time. In any period when philosophy and history function as aspects of poetry rather than claiming (even if speciously) the status of autonomous enterprises, poetry does the collective thinking of a people. Through the ritualized discourse of poetry, issues of common concern in a society are thought through and are resolved in the form of stories told in a heightened mode of speech. In a tradition-bound medium of this kind, as Umberto Eco has said of the tradition of medieval scholastic thought, 'Innovation came without fanfare, even secretively, and developed by fits and starts until it was eventually absorbed within a free-and-easy syncretism'.[104]

One task still facing medievalists is to define more exactly the nature of the syncretistic system of thought that underlies *Beowulf* and comparable early narratives and that lends them ethical and spiritual significance. It is safe to predict that this task will never be complete, for in attempting it we are defining our own mentality as much as that of a distant historical period. Much is at stake when it comes to the study of origins. As Edward Said has remarked, 'There is no such thing as a merely given, or simply available, starting point: beginnings have to be made for each project in such a way as to *enable* what follows from them.'[105] In early English literary history, questions relating to origins are also ones of character and potential use. 'Is it oral or literary?' 'Is it pagan or Christian?' 'Is it Germanic or Latinate?' 'Is it a part of English literature, or not?' 'Is it *ours* or *theirs*?' One's answers to these questions are likely to reveal as much about one's own cultural investments as they suggest about a society and a literature that are now vanished beyond all power of recall except in terms that make sense in our own consciousness. Precisely because the effort to understand the place of a work in literary history is itself a historically conditioned enterprise that almost cannot help but be bound up, whether implicitly or explicitly, with the aims of cultural critique,[106] the task should not be abandoned, however recalcitrant it may seem.

[104] Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. by Hugh Bredin (New Haven, 1986), p. 2.

[105] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978), p. 16, summarizing his own argument in his book *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York, 1975).

[106] In their book *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago, 1986), George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer make the same point about ethnography that I am making about literary history, which can take on the aspect of an ethnography of the past.

Recent Work on Mythmaking and Ethnogenesis, with Some Thoughts on the Normative

Ethnicity, ethnogenesis, and what I have here called 'ethnopoesis' have been the topic of lively discussion among historians of late, including those who specialize in the period of *Völkerwanderungen* that encompasses the settlement of Britain by peoples speaking a Germanic tongue.[1] In the preceding chapter I touch on both the initial Anglo-Saxon settlement of England and the ninth- and tenth-century period of political consolidation and state-formation, and several footnotes in that chapter refer to recent studies that are of interest in both regards.[2] The authors of those studies provide a more comprehensive account of what I try to achieve here through very specialized means, the study of Old English vernacular poetry.

In a recent study titled 'What Does the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* Tell Us About "Ethnic" Origins?', Harald Kleinschmidt fruitfully approaches the references to the *adventus Saxonum* that are incorporated into the annals of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as examples of the literature of migrationism. By that term he refers to 'a category of perception which adduces memories of migration as elements of the

[1] Two relevant essay collections of particular interest to Anglo-Saxonists are *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. by John Hines (Woodbridge, 1997), and *On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. by Andrew Gillett (Turnhout, 2002). Among the stimulating essays in the former volume, worth particular note is Walter Pohl's 'Ethnic Names and Identities in the British Isles: A Comparative Perspective' (pp. 7–32, with discussion on pp. 32–40). Patrick J. Geary offers an analysis of ethnicity and ethnogenesis as a general phenomenon in *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton, 2002).

[2] Notes 6 on pp. 16–17 and 34 on p. 26, in particular.

historical explanation of past changes';[3] that is, he converts into the realm of psychology and collective consciousness what had earlier been taken to be a set of historical claims requiring either acceptance or disproof. Emphasizing that migrationism serves as 'an instrument for the legitimation of existing social hierarchies and institutions of government' among people who accept a tradition of common origins,[4] Kleinschmidt mounts a detailed argument to the effect that the *Chronicle* entries relating to the fifth-century period of conquest and settlement were 'politically motivated' and 'promoted a fundamental reconstruction' of earlier history in a manner favourable to the West Saxon royal dynasty. Kleinschmidt thus develops into a new, postmodern dimension an argument that was made thirty years ago in a landmark article by M. B. Parkes, who pointed out that the codex containing the earliest extant manuscript of the *Chronicle* (the A version, also known as the Parker Chronicle) represents a continuing, self-conscious effort on the part of persons associated with the West Saxon court to promote their own self-interest.[5] Both these arguments fit in well, I think, with my own.

An original perspective on the place of *Beowulf* in the Anglo-Saxons' internal debate concerning their ethnic origins is offered by Craig R. Davis in his rewarding book *Beowulf and the Demise of Germanic Legend in England*, as well as in others of his recent studies.[6] Davis sees the myth of ethnogenesis that is implied in the narrative of *Beowulf* as a marginal one that had no lasting influence among the Anglo-Saxons. In his view, both *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon* are 'the shoreward surges of a retreating tide of Germanic tradition'.[7]

My own view is rather different. I see *Beowulf*, in particular, as one component of a vernacular myth of ethnic origins that was emerging, not retreating, during

[3] Harald Kleinschmidt, 'What Does the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* Tell Us About "Ethnic" Origins?', *Studi Medievali*, 3rd series, 42 (2001), 1–40 (p. 2).

[4] Kleinschmidt, 'What Does the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* Tell Us', p. 2.

[5] M. B. Parkes, 'The Palaeography of the Parker Manuscript of the *Chronicle*, Laws and Sedulius, and Historiography at Winchester in the Late Ninth and Tenth Centuries', *ASE*, 5 (1976), 149–71.

[6] Craig R. Davis, *Beowulf and the Demise of Germanic Legend in England* (New York, 1996). See also Davis, 'Redundant Ethnogenesis in *Beowulf*', in the electronic journal *The Heroic Age: A Journal of Early Medieval and Northwestern Europe*, 5 (2001) at the following address: http://www.mun.ca/mst/heroicage/issues/5/Davis1.html. Of closely related interest is Davis's forthcoming study 'An Ethnic Dating of *Beowulf*', *ASE*, 35 (2006), 111–29.

[7] Craig R. Davis, 'Cultural Historicity in *The Battle of Maldon*', *PQ,* 78 (1999), 151–69 (p. 166).

the period of nation-building that extended from the reign of Alfred to the reign of Æthelred. The new, pseudo-historical concepts of English origins that find expression in the verse and prose writings of this period both complemented Bede's authoritative Latin account of the origins of the *gens Anglorum* and, to some extent, offered an alternative to that account. Where Davis sees Germanic tradition as receding into a twilight zone of irrelevancy for cultured Anglo-Saxons, I see evidence of active mythmaking. Where Davis sees a retreating tide, I see waters in ferment. By speaking of their real or invented heroic past — a past that was now linked to the biblical world through elaborate genealogies going back to Noah — the English shored up their ethnic credentials while also keeping alive the memory of ancestral heroes for purposes that ranged from the ethical to the political.[8]

As part of an article published in 2001, now folded into his ambitious book *Race and Ethnicity in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, Stephen J. Harris mounts an argument that is identical, in its main points, to the one that I presented in the article on which the preceding chapter is based and that is presented here in a corrected and more fully developed form.[9] Harris, too, seeks to rehabilitate Leake's concept of geographical mythology. At the same time, he, too, accepts the period-specific validity of the Alfredian revision of Bede's account of the origins of the English, and he relates that rewriting of history to the pseudo-geographical lore that figures in the Old English Orosius, the work that is his chief concern. Since Harris shows no awareness of my 1993 article, I assume that he arrived at his conclusions by a process of independent thought based on his own sifting of the evidence. The similarity in our views would seem to add to the weight of the arguments we advance.

In the course of a wide-ranging and stimulating book, John M. Hill has approached *Beowulf* as an example of socially functional myth.[10] His discussion of that poem as constituting an authorizing past for the people of Anglo-Saxon England[11] complements my own concept of the world of *Beowulf* as constituting, for that same people, 'a legendary counterpart to their own era, one that chartered

[8] Readers who wish to pursue these differences of opinion are invited to read Davis's book and my review of it in *Speculum*, 73 (1998), 497–99.

[9] Stephen J. Harris, 'The Alfredian *World History* and Anglo-Saxon Identity', *JEGP*, 100 (2001), 482–510 (at pp. 485–88); *Race and Ethnicity in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (New York, 2003), pp. 84–86.

[10] John M. Hill, *The Cultural World in Beowulf* (Toronto, 1995), ch. 2, 'The Temporal World in *Beowulf*' (pp. 38–62).

[11] Hill, *Cultural World in Beowulf*, p. 39.

their cherished institutions' (p. 27 above). At the same time, there are important differences between Hill's approach to that authorizing past and mine.[12] Hill does not conceive of the English as distancing themselves from their period of imagined tribal origins. Rather, while accepting that their religion (their 'theistic scope', in his phrasing) had undergone a major change since pagan days, he stresses that through their heroic poetry, the people of Anglo-Saxon England cultivated a sense of being directly connected to a past that they found 'normative':

> The *Beowulf* poet looks back to an heroic past that is mythic. He seamlessly establishes a basic continuity with that past. Indeed, he asserts a fundamental *sameness* of values and reality that frames his moderate sense of difference in some customs and in the theistic scope his noble characters express. He inveighs strongly against heathen worship and he clearly establishes a double perspective in the poem — speaking to his audience about things his noble characters do not know (such as Grendel's associative, genealogical link with Cain). But that perspective does not put him or his audience into an ironic and dismissive relationship with the past. The poet and the poem assert the 'normative' relationship of the past to the (unspecified) Anglo-Saxon present; the poet does not alienate that past from himself and his writerly present.[13]

As regards the Anglo-Saxons having an 'ironic and dismissive' attitude toward their legendary past, I concur with Hill that such a phrase has little application to *Beowulf* and the other heroic poetry of this era. This poetry does not dismiss the past, it tells of it. Anglo-Saxon biblical poetry did much the same thing in regard to the stories of Old Testament times, much of which, similarly, involved heroism and wonders of all kinds.

On the other hand, was the legendary past a normative one for the Anglo-Saxons? I think not. In the preceding chapter, for example, I speak of Scyld Scefing as an example of a ruler who is a *gōd cyning* 'good king' in the terms of his own pagan era, but who scarcely could be considered an example of an ideal king from an Anglo-Saxon Christian perspective. Scyld merits the non-ironic adjective *gōd* for he is a great and successful warlord as well as the founder of a dynasty, and the Anglo-Saxons valued kings who won battles and established stable regimes. The problem with Scyld is that, as far as we are told about his life, he is *nothing but* a great warlord. Much evidence suggests that knowledgeable people living in

[12] Relevant to this difference of opinion between Hill and myself are the views of Roberta Frank, 'The *Beowulf* Poet's Sense of History', in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*, ed. by Larry D. Benson and Siegfried Wenzel (Kalamazoo, 1982), pp. 53–65 and 271–77. I am indebted to Frank's supple discussion of these issues.

[13] Hill, *Cultural World in Beowulf*, p. 40.

Anglo-Saxon England during the period after the conversion set a high value on kings who both won battles and offered models of enlightened spiritual leadership, as King Alfred famously did. So Scyld Scefing is praised, and yet such praise has only a limited normative value. Similarly, when speaking elsewhere of *The Wife's Lament*, I have emphasized the distancing effects in that poem that offset a fascination with the roots of English culture in a remote imagined past.[14] When speaking of the antique legendary world to which allusions are made in *Deor*, I will likewise have occasion to refer to a group of tyrants, rapists, and murderers whose behaviour could scarcely be called normative from an ethical perspective that had been influenced by the teachings of Christianity to the slightest extent.[15] The allusions to the Heroic Age of the Germanic peoples that occur in the Old English poetic records are best taken as signs of nostalgia for a past to which one does not, of course, want to return.

In my own view, the relatively high-ranking members of later Anglo-Saxon society seem to have viewed the pagan heroic past (as they were encouraged to view the Old Testament past, as well) as providing a deep fund of stories with which anyone aspiring to wisdom was expected to be acquainted. Without irony, their poets told of that authorizing past in stories that etched upon one's mind those principles of generosity, truth, courage, and selflessness that were valued as the basis of social order, and that indeed are still honoured in some circles today. Conversely, the poets also told of greed, of untruth, of cowardice, and of arrogance, thereby confirming the very same system of values through spectacularly negative examples. The fact that these tales of ancestral heroes were animated by marvels of sundry kinds, just as the stories of Abraham, Moses, and other biblical patriarchs were, served to locate them in a kind of 'mythtime' that could not possibly be confused with the Anglo-Saxons' own present era. In short, to make an essential distinction, the heroic past had exemplary force for the Anglo-Saxons, but it was scarcely a normative guide to behaviour.

[14] To quote from my study of that poem in *Old English Enigmatic Poems and the Play of the Texts* (Turnhout, 2006), p. 156: 'To judge from their extant heroic and elegiac literature, the Anglo-Saxons never ceased being fascinated by stories of their grander and more brutal ancestors. They must have brewed from those tales a heady mixture of history, nostalgia, escapism, moral philosophy, and genealogical pride, as well as a sense of their own enlightened spirituality when measuring themselves against the people of former times.'

[15] See pp. 172–73 of the present volume.

Query

How Real Are the Geats? And Why Does this English Poem Never Mention the English?

How Real Are the Geats?

Perhaps I may correct a misapprehension about my thinking about the Gēatas of *Beowulf* that finds its way into a book, *Landscape of Desire*, to which reference is made in the preceding chapter. In paraphrasing some remarks that I once presented viva voce at a conference of Anglo-Saxonists, my friend Professor Marijane Osborn writes that 'he [that is, I] seemed to feel it important [. . .] to demote Beowulf 's Geats to a mythical tribe'. Moreover, she affirms that I agree with a statement by Jane Leake to the effect that 'Hygelac, along with his Geats, never existed'.[1]

Paraphrasing the informal exchanges that take place at academic conferences is always a hazardous business, particularly given the liquid refreshments that flow liberally on such occasions. I do not remember what I said during this exchange, although I retain fond blurry memories of the weekend when it took place. This is as good a place as any, then, to clarify that I part company with Leake when she denies the historicity of the Gēatas. If the Gēatas of *Beowulf* are rightly considered to be the same tribe as the Swedish tribe named the Gautar, then they had a historical existence, for the Gautar did. Nor, to set a second point straight, do I conceive of the process of mythmaking as some kind of 'demotion' of historical truth, in Professor Osborn's phrasing. If anything, the process of mythmaking serves to promote and magnify history in service of a higher cause. This is a point to which I will return in a later chapter ('True Stories and Other Lies').

[1] Gillian R. Overing and Marijane Osborn, *Landscape of Desire: Partial Stories of the Medieval Scandinavian World* (Minneapolis, 1994), at p. 14 and p. 27, respectively.

So I do not think of the Gēatas or their Geatish homeland as 'not existing'. For practical purposes, on the other hand, I see no evidence of them being anything other than the creation of writing. In this regard my thinking is in rough alignment with Ian Wood's concept of Burgundian ethnicity when he writes that 'the Burgundians were not defined by blood but by those who wrote about them'.[2] Moreover, I continue to have only the mildest sense of what difference the question of the historical existence of the Gēatas makes to our understanding of *Beowulf* and the cultural work performed by that poem. The Danes of *Beowulf* are another matter altogether. Not only is their existence well attested through historical and archaeological sources outside this poem. In addition, the historical Danes of the ninth and tenth centuries were a matter of huge concern to the English people who fought them off, converted them, made alliances with them through marriage, learned better nautical skills and legal tactics and mercantile practices from them, and so forth. But the Gēatas are historical non-entities, and very little is known even about the Gautar as a historical tribe. It could even be argued that the very blankness of the Gēatas makes them a suitable choice as the hero's tribe. The phenomenon (to which Roberta Frank has called attention) whereby that hero is linked to a number of other tribes who figure in the poem is thus more easily understood,[3] for through his capacity to achieve such affiliations, the hero very nearly transcends the whole vicious web of intertribal rivalries and feuds that the poet depicts with such grim precision.

What does matter very much, then, is the existence of the Gēatas in the poet's imagination. Hygelac, the Gēatas, and the Geatish homeland all exist quite vividly in the pages of *Beowulf*, as does the hero Beowulf himself, and for these facts we may be thankful. Few persons, I suspect, would accuse the hero Beowulf of having lived in history. Why, then, should one trouble so much about demonstrating the historicity of his Gēatas, unless one happens to want to claim the Gēatas as an ancestral tribe so as to be able to walk taller in Winchester, Rome, Aachen, or other places?

History and myth can coexist, then, each of them independent of the other and each with its own validity. To take an example from the ancient past, the fact that an actual complex of settlements dating from the Mycenaean era, a complex that

[2] Ian Wood, 'Ethnicity and the Ethnogenesis of the Burgundians', in *Typen der Ethnogenese*, 2 vols, ed. by Hervig Wolfram and Walter Pohl (Vienna, 1990), I, 53–70 (p. 64).

[3] 'The *Beowulf* poet does his best to attach his pagan champion to as many peoples as possible — Danes, Geats, Swedes, Wulfings, and Wægmundings': Roberta Frank, 'The *Beowulf* Poet's Sense of History', in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*, ed. by Larry D. Benson and Siegfried Wenzel (Kalamazoo, 1982), pp. 53–65 and 271–77 (p. 64).

we call 'Troy', has been discovered near the mouth of the Hellespont is interesting, and yet this tells us nothing of any substance concerning Helen and her abduction from Sparta or the defilement of Hector's corpse at Achilles' savage hands. These matters fall into the domains of literature and comparative mythology, not into any historian's bailiwick. One could say that the subjective truth value of the whole Trojan-war complex is enhanced through the convergence of archaeology and legend, but that is all. To cite a hypothetical example illustrating this same point: if centuries hence a story is told about two distinguished scholars who, one summer during our era, sailed up the Kattegat in a quest to locate Beowulf's tomb overlooking the coast of Sweden, found it, and entered it, only to find thereafter that it disappeared in mist, the existence of a legend of that kind will neither prove nor disprove that Professor Overing and Professor Osborn ever existed.

To return to *Beowulf*: to the extent that one views the Gēatas as the same people as the Gautar, they may be regarded as a historical tribe. Hygelac may indeed have been a flesh-and-blood king of the Gēatas/Gautar, even though there is some disagreement in the medieval records regarding his name and his ethnic identity. These elements can be construed as part of the poem's historical base: a base that resembles a swampy marsh rather more closely than a hard foundation of cut stone. Such base elements can coexist with a superstructure of stories of a colourful kind concerning Beowulf and his adventures with cannibalistic giants in Denmark, the ravages of a very unforgiving dragon, and (from a more respectable documentary source, but an equally fanciful idea) the role of the Gēatas in the founding of England.

From one perspective, the legendary superstructure is all that matters, for when we start talking about the world of *Beowulf* in any depth or detail, we soon become aware that, for the most part, its historical basis is beyond recovery. Historians do not like situations like that, for it rather takes the wind out of their sails as historians. That is one reason why I am at home in the corridors of an English department and glance over my shoulder a bit nervously when I find myself in the building across the way.

Why Does Beowulf *Not Mention the English?*

The preceding discussion regarding the historicity of the Gēatas is not unrelated to another question that deserves attention. This is the *Beowulf* poet's exclusive concern with things Scandinavian, as far as his overt narrative is concerned. T. A. Shippey and Andreas Haarder, for example, have recently spoken of the efforts of early critics of *Beowulf* to address 'a problem for which we still have no accepted

solution: why does this English poem never mention England or any English event?'.[4]

The assumptions that underlie this question are worth investigating. Quite obviously, it seems to me, the reason that the *Beowulf* poet never makes explicit mention of the people and institutions of Anglo-Saxon England is because his poem is set on the Continent at a much earlier date. After all, the poet is an artist, and his art demands a certain amount of integrity. He could not very well sprinkle his narrative with topical references to England any more than the Anglo-Saxon poets who paraphrased Old Testament narratives could do so. To pursue that parallel, I doubt that anyone would care to advance the argument that an English audience of any period would be disinterested in biblical tales (together with the lore and wisdom embodied in those tales) on the grounds that the Bible does not speak of the English.

There is another strong reason why overt references to the English are not to be found in *Beowulf*, however, and that is that the poet sees to it that the people of England are praised or celebrated obliquely. He does this through allusions to their ancestors. Since the upper classes of Anglo-Saxon England seem to have taken just as keen and self-serving an interest in genealogy and heroic history as their counterparts in other times and places have done, it is a safe wager that these allusions were widely understood. Since the allusions are oblique, their presence can be denied. Two of them, all the same, are non-controversial; a third rests on equally solid ground; and readers who accept the arguments that are advanced in the preceding chapter will acknowledge the validity of the fourth. Here it is enough to cite these claims in summary form.

(1) The Angles, as is universally acknowledged, are flattered through prominent allusion to the great Anglian king Offa I. After the Mercian royal line was absorbed by the West Saxon royal line through King Alfred's marriage to a Mercian princess, that flattery would have applied to the English people in general, whatever their regional affiliations were.

(2) The kings of the West Saxon royal line are flattered through prominent early mention of the 'Danish' king Scyld, whom those English kings claimed as an ancestor. Such praise thereby sheds reflected lustre on the people of Wessex and, after the absorption of the Danelaw by Wessex, on the English people as a whole.

(3) The people of England are flattered through prominent mention of Hengest, the victor at Finnsburh and the famous conqueror of Britain. This

[4] *Beowulf: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by T. A. Shippey and Andreas Haarder (London, 1998), p. 44.

flattery may be thought to pertain especially to the royal line of Kent, but Hengest, in Bede's account of the Conquest, is presented as a founder of Saxon England in general, not just Kent. In any event, by the late ninth century (when Kent was absorbed into Wessex) the compliment would have been a general one.

(4) Those people living along the south coast of Britain who considered themselves to be of Jutish ancestry, doing their best to make sense of that somewhat obscure element of their past, would have been flattered by the poet's choosing to tell an epic-length tale celebrating the deeds of Beowulf the Geat, for by the end of the ninth century, Bede's Jutes were coming to be understood to be Gēatas. The very idea of making the hero of the poem a Geat, in fact, may have arisen in part from the lack of any real heroic history concerning the Gēatas, even though a tribe of that name was honoured by the translator of the Old English Bede as one of the three founding tribes of Anglo-Saxon Britain.

A good example of the way the *Beowulf* poet praises the English people through oblique means is provided by the 'Song of Finn and Hengest', the 'song within the song' that the poet chooses out from among all other possibilities as the one to be performed during the festivities in Heorot that follow the defeat of Grendel (lines 1066–1159a). As we have seen, the person who occupies the hero position in that song is Hengest. Very plausibly, the same Hengest who is identified in the pages of Bede and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as a Jute who came to Britain from Jutland, and whom any reader of the Old English Bede and the Old English Orosius would have taken to be a Geat who came to Britain from Gotland, is celebrated in a song for which Beowulf and his band of warriors are the principal audience. A song about a famous warrior-hero, Hengest, is thus sung before a group of Geatish guests who, if they had been flesh-and-blood persons, could have thought of that man as a countryman, even if here he is identified as one of a band of 'Half-Danes' (whatever that name implies). This choice of a song thereby involves an element of flattery, whatever else it entails. As for the real members of the audience of that song — that is, actual Anglo-Saxons reading the poem *Beowulf*, or hearing it read or performed — they would have been free to bask in the glory of both Hengest and the Gēatas, for all these ancient heroes were to be counted among the ancestors of the English, Hengest by virtue of his conquests and the Gēatas through their ethnicity.[5]

[5] This is not a new observation on my part. It may still be worth making, however, as it is not accepted in the current climate of opinion about *Beowulf*, which for many years has been paralysed by the equation of the Gēatas with the historical tribe the Gautar (or Götar). Viggo Starcke, *Denmark in World History* (Philadelphia, 1963; first edn, Copenhagen, 1946), clearly understands

If the question 'why does this English poem never mention England or any English event?' is thought to be worth posing, then, it can be seen to have a reasonable answer. Still, for the possible interest of anyone unconvinced by the foregoing arguments, I will address that same question in a third manner via the distinction of unmarked versus marked terms that is a foundational element of modern linguistic theory.

In brief, an unmarked term denotes something that is felt to be central and normative in a given society, whereas a marked term denotes something that is other than normative. Examples drawn from modern English usage are the unmarked words 'legal' and 'natural' versus 'illegal' and 'unnatural'. There is also — need we say it? — unmarked 'man' (from OE *monn* 'man, person') versus marked 'woman' (from OE *wif-monn* 'woman-person', always the one to be watched out for, as it seems). A sense of English identity is so central to the *Beowulf* poet's project, I would argue, that it never needs to be raised at the marked level of discourse. It is the default value, the 'us' against which all the tribes and kings and heroes of northern yesteryears are measured and, often, found wanting. Indeed, the poem's ideological power would be diminished if its nationalist implications were made explicit, for ideology likes nothing better than to don the cloak of invisibility.

When I turn to *Widsith* in the next chapter, that same observation will be confirmed. The *Widsith* poet seems to have unlocked his word-hoard about every tribe of Europe except the people of Anglo-Saxon England. The reason for his silence in this regard is that the poet and his audience, as inhabitants of England, would naturally have assumed their own pride of place. They would have been aware that every tribe mentioned in that poem has importance chiefly in relation to them. Both *Beowulf* and *Widsith* could thereby have promoted the Anglo-Saxons' sense of their own self-worth while seeming to be nothing more than narrative entertainment (or, with reference to *Widsith*, a neutral encyclopedia of knowledge about the past).

the importance of the tribal identities that come into play in this scene: 'If Beowulf and the Geatas were Jutes it would have been appropriate to sing this song about the famous Jutish hero in honor of the famous visitor Beowulf, but if the Geatas were Götar [Gautar] it would have been as tactless as celebrating a visit of the Swedish King to the Danish Court of today by singing the Norwegian national anthem' (p. 105). As a former Danish cabinet minister and member of parliament, Starcke may well have been influenced by the old 'Jutes vs. Gautar' dispute whose terms are now somewhat outdated. We must remember that Beowulf is not a Jute, he is a Gēat, and the Gēatas are Gēatas, not Jutes or Gautar. But as long as those qualifications are kept in mind, Starcke's point is a refreshing reminder that this supposedly neutral song of the scop about the heroic past has implications both for court protocol in Denmark and (as I am arguing) for English attempts to shape the past along ethnocentric lines.

In terms of moral chararacter, every tribe that receives prominent mention in either *Beowulf* or *Widsith* (or in *Deor* as well, for that matter) is 'marked' as something other than normative. To the extent that these people are conceived of as ancestors, the audience is invited to take pride in that connection, but from an ethical perspective they are deeply ambiguous figures. Leaving aside the chief hero himself as a special case, the kings and heroes that the *Beowulf* poet projects upon his stage offer few role models. Wiglaf is one; it is hard to find a second. The Danes of *Beowulf* drink more beer than is good for them, prove themselves helpless against the Grendel creatures, bluster, commit sacrilege, and jockey to find a good position to knife one another in the back. The Gēatas of *Beowulf* (with the exception, once again, of Beowulf and Wiglaf) tend to be quicker on the trigger than is good for them unless there is a dragon on the scene, when they are nowhere to be found. The Swedes are bloodthirsty warriors who seem to like it that way. The Goths of *Widsith* are praised for their prodigious wealth and generosity, but their martial society produced rulers who were notorious tyrants and killers. The only legendary king introduced in these poems who wins unambiguous praise is Offa, king of the Continental Angles,[6] and no one living in Anglo-Saxon England had to guess who the Angles were.

My suggestion regarding the power of unmarked terms to take on a crucial role in discourse about the past differs from a suggestion that has recently been made by R. D. Fulk and Christopher Cain regarding the reason why Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry makes no explicit mention of the English. Those authors suggest that the reason for that silence is that the English are 'less susceptible to being rendered larger than life with any plausibility'.[7] That is a reasonable point and not one with which I would quarrel, even though some of my English friends might. Still, to my mind, the best answer to the question 'Why are the English not mentioned in these poems?' is a paradoxical one: namely, that the poets who fashioned these works (acting in evident consort with the audiences who valued them) wished, without any fanfare, to visualize the past in configurations that sharply enhanced the stature of the English.

[6] If anyone were to suggest that the Scyld Scefing of the first lines of *Beowulf* is held up as a role model (see verse 11b, *þæt wæs god cyning!*), I suggest that he is not. A 'good' king in the bad old days, one who is good at terrorizing his neighbours into yielding tribute, is not necessarily a good king by the civilized Christian standards of the period extending from the reign of King Alfred to the late tenth century. The people of Anglo-Saxon England had suffered no little damage from 'good' Scandinavian kings of Scyld's type.

[7] Fulk and Cain, p. 221.

Chapter 2

Widsith, the Goths, and the Anthropology of the Past

Thanks in part to the opacity with which it names, without comment, tribe after tribe and ruler after ruler of the ancient world, the poem that we know as *Widsith* defies literary analysis. Those who are familiar with this work, either in modern translation or in its unique Old English text, will recall above all its central character, the itinerant singer Widsith himself, who is the imagined speaker of all but the first nine and last nine lines.[1] The emphatically poetic speech locution that begins the poem — 'Widsið maðolade, wordhord onleac' (Widsith spoke, he unlocked his hoard of words, 1) — marks off the long speech that follows it as a formal one that is imagined to take place in a dignified setting.[2] A visual cue reinforces this rhetorical emphasis, in that the large uppercase *wynn* with which the poem begins (see Figure 2) marks out this text as exceptional within the Exeter Book. In elevated poetic discourse, the singer tells how he found patronage among various tribes and kings of the past, some of

The present chapter represents a revision of an article first published in a collection of essays edited by John M. Hill. Anyone interested in the application of anthropological models to Old English poetry will be indebted to Hill's publications in that area, including *The Cultural World in Beowulf* (Toronto, 1995).

[1] See *The Exeter Book of Old English Poetry*, introd. by R. W. Chambers, Max Förster, and Robin Flower (London, 1933), fols 84^{v}–87^{r}. The folio on which the poem begins is Figure 2 of the present volume. In the present chapter, citations of the text of *Widsith* refer to the edition by Krapp and Dobbie.

[2] This point is made by Matti Rissanen, '*Maþelian* in Old English Poetry', in *Words and Works: Essays in Medieval English Language and Literature in Honour of Fred C. Robinson*, ed. by Peter S. Baker and Nicholas Howe (Toronto, 1998), pp. 159–72.

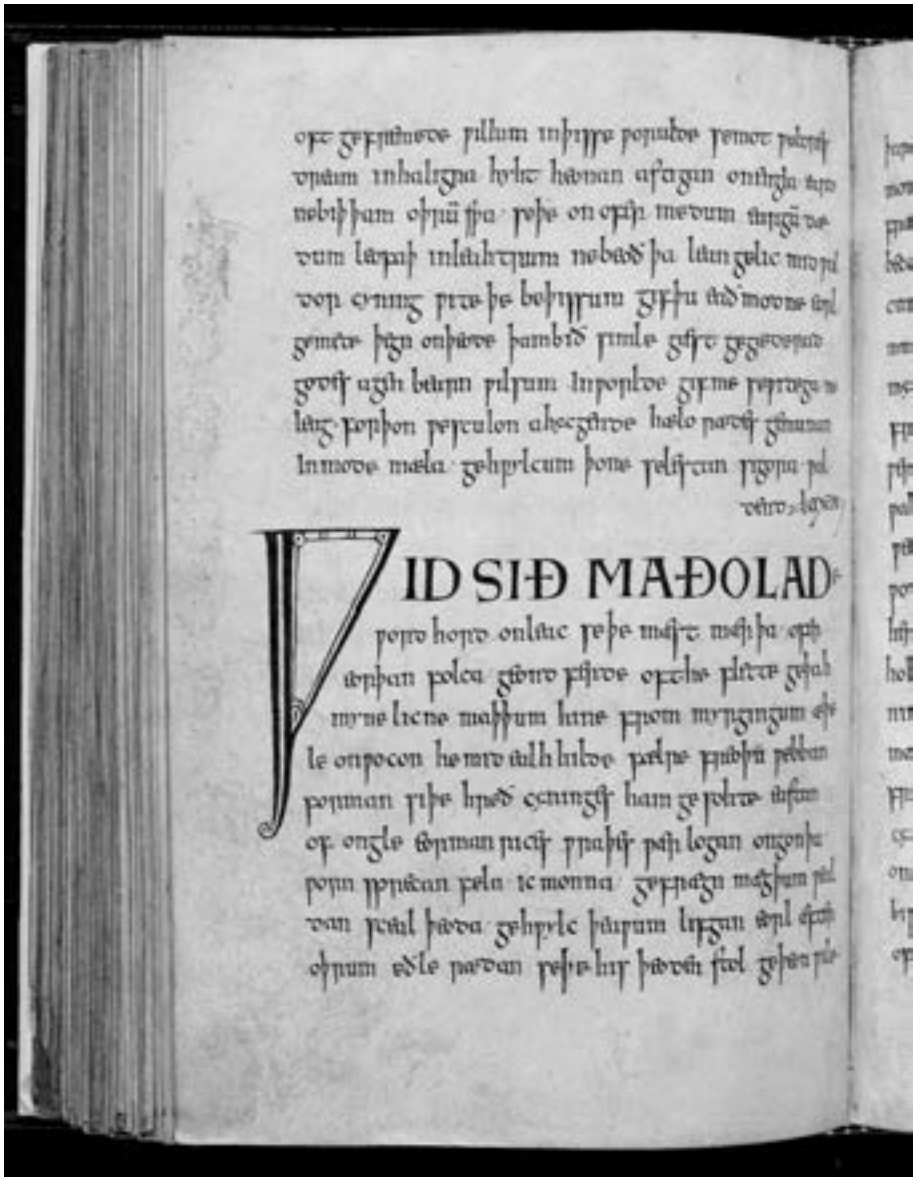

Figure 2. The beginning of *Widsith*. Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS 3501, fol. 84^{v}.

whom he celebrates in short passages of eulogistic verse. The ruler whom Widsith singles out for special attention is Eormanric (or Ermanaric),[3] the legendary king of the Goths, who commands ambiguous attention as both a magnificent host and a *wærloga* 'oath-breaker'.[4] Despite this uneasy mix of praise and blame, Eormanric stands out as a grand figure suggestive of the idealized archetypal king of former times, just as Widsith is the idealized bard who is imagined to have entertained him. One can forgive readers if their memories of other aspects of the poem remain a blur. Few people praise *Widsith* for its artistic qualities, for compared with *Beowulf* (a poem with which it is often rightly linked)[5] its narrative moments are empty of drama. The anonymous author of this text seems not to have aspired

[3] The presentation of Germanic proper names in modern English spellings presents a special challenge to anyone writing about *Widsith*. In an attempt to come to terms with this poet's insular conception of history, I will cite the names of persons first of all in the forms used in that OE text (e.g. Eormanric, Ælfwine) while at times taking supplementary notice of the spellings used by chroniclers writing in Latin (e.g. Ermanaric, Alboin). Primary use of Latinate spellings would run the risk of obscuring the mentality embodied in this poem.

[4] Needlessly, in my opinion, the phrase *wraþes wærlogan* 'of the cruel oath-breaker' (9a) has become a crux in the interpretation of *Widsith*. Ever since Benjamin Thorpe's first modern edition of the Exeter Book (*Codex Exoniensis*, London, 1842) some readers have questioned whether such a negative epithet is appropriate to Eormanric. There should be no linguistic grounds for doubt, however, that that phrase, in the genitive singular case, is to be taken in apposition with the immediately preceding noun *Eormanrices* (8b), also in the genitive singular case, a noun that in turn is in grammatical apposition with the earlier genitive singular noun *Hreðcyninges* 'of the glorious king' (7a). It is Eormanric, the glorious king, who was a troth-breaker. His high stature is what makes his perfidy worth remembrance. On the interpretation of verse 9a, I accept the reading of R. W. Chambers, *Widsith: A Study in Old English Heroic Legend* (Cambridge, 1912), p. 190 (n. to line 9); for discussion of this King's ambiguous reputation, see ibid., pp. 15–36. An opposing view is offered by Kemp Malone, ed., *Widsith*, 2nd edn (Copenhagen, 1962), pp. 29–35 and 146–49.

[5] Roberta Frank, 'Germanic Legend in Old English Literature', in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. by Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 88–106, calls attention to specific features that are shared between the two poems and concludes that 'whatever its age, it [*Widsith*] was probably not composed at any great remove, in time or place, from *Beowulf*' (p. 99). Although in that study she does not attempt to date either poem, elsewhere she has shown reason to relate *Beowulf* to a tenth-century Anglo-Scandinavian milieu and to that period of reflection about Germanic antiquity that followed upon King Alfred the Great's educational reforms; see her essays 'Skaldic Verse and the Date of *Beowulf*', in *The Dating of Beowulf*, ed. by Colin Chase (Toronto, 1981), pp. 123–39, and 'The *Beowulf* Poet's Sense of History', in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*, ed. by Larry D. Benson and Siegfried Wenzel (Kalamazoo, 1982), pp. 53–65 and 271–77.

to the literary verve that distinguishes some of its well-known companion pieces in the Exeter Book. A detractor could call *Widsith* the sort of thing that results when a piece of language cannot make up its mind if it is a minimalist short story or a shopping list. In an inspired pun, one critic has referred to it as arguably the greatest 'scissors-and-past' job in English literature.[6]

That *Widsith* contains remarkable items of pseudo-historical lore should go without saying. That it is composed in a genre of its own is clear. That it is a profitable text to study, a work that is capable of yielding important insights into the early culture of the British Isles, remains to be shown. In the past, those scholars who were accustomed to tracing all good things to their origins in ancient Germania tended to regard *Widsith* as the earliest poem in the English language (which it surely is not) and therefore as a precious example of primitive poetry[7] — a misunderstanding that also identified it as a sub-literary work undeserving of critical attention. The poem's two chief modern editors, R. W. Chambers and Kemp Malone, used its lists of proper names as points of access to some of the great stories and cast-off ephemera of Germanic antiquity.[8] Their commentaries, though learned to a degree that would be hard to imitate today, are not necessarily to the taste of current readers who turn a sceptical eye on claims regarding ancient Germania or who dismiss that term as one that has largely outlived its usefulness outside the orbit of ancient Rome.[9] One modern critic, regarding the poem not so much as a source of information about the past as a source of insight into how the Anglo-Saxons idealized the past, has used Widsith's imagined autobiographical journey as the focal point for remarks concerning the role of the poet in early English society.[10]

[6] Nicholas Howe, *The Old English Catalogue Poems* (Copenhagen, 1985), p. 171. Howe himself resists a dismissive attitude of that kind.

[7] George K. Anderson, *The Literature of the Anglo-Saxons* (Princeton, 1949), typifies this fanciful early opinion: 'The first Catalogue of Kings [lines 18–36] is of great antiquity, probably antedating the migration of the Anglo-Saxons to Britain, at any rate from early in the sixth century. It is consequently the oldest extant piece of English poetry' (p. 61).

[8] See the citations to Chambers and Malone in note 4 above.

[9] Note Frank, 'Germanic Legend in Old English Literature', p. 92: 'I would argue that this concept of "Germanic" [i.e. the modern linguistic concept] was not shared by the early Anglo-Saxons. The literary category that we call "Germanic legend" is ours, not theirs.' The tendency of nineteenth-century scholars to construe Anglo-Saxon England as a part of ancient Germania, thus extending modern political pan-Germanism back into the first millennium AD, is one of many competing impulses that have shaped modern conceptions of the early medieval past.

[10] Robert P. Creed, 'Widsith's Journey through Germanic Tradition', in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation*, ed. by Lewis E. Nicholson and Dolores W. Frese (Notre Dame, 1975), pp.

In its idealization of the singer of tales, such a study, though full of insight, runs the risk of mirroring the poet's own ideal portrait of the scop and thereby provides ammunition for cynics who view the search for the Anglo-Saxon oral poet as largely the quest for a chimera.[11] Despite one hundred and fifty years of commentary, *Widsith* remains an enigmatic work whose reason for existence is obscure.

My first purpose in this essay is to promote understanding of *Widsith* in period-specific terms by inquiring into the cultural work that must have been done by a poem of this kind during the time when it was in circulation. I shall do so chiefly by focusing on the question 'What is the point of the main narrative concerning Widsith and the Goths?'. This is a question that is best answered, I believe, with reference to tenth-century Anglo-Saxon politics, which are deeply enmeshed in attempts to synthesize the heritage and aspirations of the peoples of various ethnicities who were becoming part of an emergent English nation. I hope to show that even if *Widsith* has only moderate appeal as 'literature' — a modern critical term for which the Anglo-Saxons had no equivalent[12] — it has compelling interest as an example of what speakers of that time called simply *gewritu* 'writings'. By approaching *Widsith* as a focal point for native English concepts of the past, I hope to relate this poem to the social order that produced it, or that more precisely was in the process of formation, thanks in part to pseudo-historical writings of this kind, during the century or so before the text in its present form was written down.[13]

376–87. Compare Creed's study of portraits of the singer in *Beowulf*, 'The Singer Looks at his Sources', in *Studies in Old English Literature in Honor of Arthur G. Brodeur*, ed. by Stanley B. Greenfield (Eugene, 1963), pp. 44–52, and Donald K. Fry's analysis of Cædmon as a type of the singer of tales, 'The Memory of Cædmon', in *Oral Traditional Literature: A Festschrift for Albert Bates Lord*, ed. by John Miles Foley (Columbus, 1981), pp. 282–93.

[11] Roberta Frank, 'The Search for the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet', *BJRL*, 75 (1993), 11–36. Frank's title echoes E. G. Stanley's classic study *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (Cambridge, 1975), which documents the extent to which the nineteenth-century reception of Old English literature was dominated by a desire to recover elements of a pagan Germanic past.

[12] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, 2nd edn (London, 1983), pp. 183–88, offers a pointed discussion of the development of the modern belletristic sense of the word 'literature'. Compare Tzvetan Todorov's problematizing of the concept of literature in ch. 1 of his *Genres in Discourse*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 1–12, originally published as *Les Genres du discours* (Paris, 1978).

[13] On the dating of *Widsith*, the most convincing arguments are those of Gösta Langenfelt, 'Studies on *Widsith*', *Namm och Bygd*, 47 (1959), 70–111, and Joyce Hill, '*Widsith* and the Tenth Century', *NM*, 85 (1984), 305–15, repr. in *Old English Shorter Poems: Basic Readings*, ed.

As has long been appreciated, *Widsith* makes a summary display of much of the knowledge that the Anglo-Saxons possessed concerning ancient peoples and kings. The poem is not what it is easily taken to be, however, a neutral 'poetic encyclopedia of early medieval Germania'.[14] Rather, it is an arrangement of information into a sequence that embodies an underlying ideology. It serves the function of what Michel Foucault has called an archive, a storehouse where knowledge about the past is too potent an intellectual commodity to be neutrally or evenly distributed.[15] When read in conjunction with other Anglo-Saxon historical writings that can plausibly be dated to the hundred-year period extending from the middle years of the reign of King Alfred, who reigned from AD 871 to 899, to about the year 975 (the approximate date when the Exeter Book was written out), the poem reveals how the English-speaking people who were living in Britain during this crucially formative period of state-formation — the *Angelþeod*, as they called themselves — were constructing their historical present, with its various ethnic constituencies, out of a series of gestures towards the past. While agreeing with Joyce Hill that *Widsith* probably gave 'enjoyment and satisfaction' to its late Anglo-Saxon audience,[16] I wish to continue where she has begun and will explore that poem's role in helping to shape historical consciousness during the period when it was read or heard.

by Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe (New York, 1994), pp. 319–33. Neither critic sees grounds for dating the poem earlier than the tenth century. Langenfelt argues for composition in the first half of the tenth century. Hill acknowledges the possibility that the poems of the Exeter Book were first assembled at an earlier date but emphasizes that our only knowledge of the poem 'is in the form in which it was evidently known and appreciated *c.* 970–1000' (p. 319). Not all recent commentators accept a relatively late date for *Widsith*. Craig R. Davis, 'Cultural Assimilation in the Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies', *ASE*, 21 (1992), 23–36, argues that *Widsith* represents a 'probably early, because relatively awkward, effort at cultural assimilation' (p. 35). Part of my purpose in this essay is to show that features of *Widsith* that have struck many readers as awkward are parts of a comprehensible design.

[14] Howe, *Old English Catalogue Poems*, p. 169. It should be emphasized that Howe acknowledges the ideological functions of such an encyclopedia. Graham Caie, 'The Shorter Heroic Verse', in *Companion to Old English Poetry*, ed. by Henk Aertsen and Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr (Amsterdam, 1994), p. 82, quotes Howe with approval though without mention of his point about ideological functions; instead, he comments that '*Widsith* seems to serve the function of a mnemonic poem that might help a poet remember the major figures of heroic legend'. My own argument is that rather than serving as a spur to individual memory, the poem helps to create a kind of collective memory.

[15] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. by A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York, 1972), pp. 128–31, originally published as *L'Archéologie du savoir* (Paris, 1969).

[16] Hill, '*Widsiþ* and the Tenth Century', p. 328.

In addition, this chapter has a second purpose: namely, to suggest that anthropological methods can clarify the role of poetry itself in the early medieval context as a form of ritualized discourse. Progress towards this goal depends upon sidestepping a number of antinomies that have preoccupied those who have written about *Widsith* in the past. I will have nothing to say about a Great Divide between 'the secular world' that the poem reflects versus 'the scriptorium' in which it was written, nor about differences between the 'original composition' that has been thought to precede our text versus the work of an 'interpolator' who added things to it, or between the 'fictional' names on the poet's list versus the 'authentic' ones (whatever this distinction is imagined to mean), or between the poem's 'popular' as opposed to 'scholarly' reception.[17] The word 'Germania' will be almost as absent from my discussion as either that noun or any synonym of it is absent from the vocabulary with which most Anglo-Saxons talked about their Continental origins. Instead, I will develop an approach to *Widsith* that illustrates what can be achieved through what can be called the anthropology of the past.

The medium of poetry in which *Widsith* is composed, I shall suggest, is a rhetorically heightened one that was particularly suited to the purposes of education in the society where it was cultivated. In this ritualized medium, associated with the human voice yet clearly distinguished from ordinary speech, poets were able to articulate that body of knowledge and that network of beliefs that were considered most essential for the members of their society to have. Whether or not my interpretation of specific details relating to *Widsith* is accepted, I hope that interest will be found in this broader argument, which is integrated into an overview of issues affecting Old English studies at the present time.[18]

Why an Anthropology of the Past?

One reason for the relative neglect of anthropological approaches to medieval literature in previous years may have been the intellectual poverty of work that has sometimes been undertaken along those lines. C. S. Lewis's attack on post-Frazerian forays into literary anthropology is well known:

[17] I cull these terms from Hill, '*Widsiþ* and the Tenth Century', an article that reviews the chief directions taken by prior *Widsith* scholarship.

[18] My point about 'the uses of the bardic' is developed at greater length, with reference to both *Widsith* and other Old English poems, in 'The Myth of the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet', at pp. 141–87 below.

> It is not to be disputed that literary texts can sometimes be of great use to the anthropologist. It does not immediately follow that anthropological study can make in return any valuable contribution to literary criticism.[19]

Lewis's complaint in his essay 'The Anthropological Approach' was that the literary qualities of a sophisticated romance like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* were in danger of being obscured by anthropological theorizing that replaced Gawain with a sun god and that offered, in place of that knight's brilliantly conceived and strangely hued adversary, nothing better than a rather ordinary-looking *enautios daimon*.[20] Lewis won his mid-twentieth-century debate with John Speirs hands down, and it is easy to see why in some circles 'anthropology' became for a while a tainted word.

Another reason for the relative neglect of anthropological approaches to medieval literature may be the turbulent state of affairs in that discipline itself, as its practitioners have sought to absorb recent challenges to its customary modes of scholarship. Postmodernism has taken on many forms since the watershed year of 1986, when a series of bombs went off that initiated a small revolution in the academy. In the field of history, William McNeill's 1986 book *Mythistory and Other Essays* is remarkable for the equanimity with which its author views the wholesale movement whereby narrative has shifted out of the realms of fact or fiction into a single encompassing realm of 'mythistory', a category so capacious as to encompass virtually any story told about the past regardless of what its truth value has sometimes been taken to be.[21] In the field of social or cultural anthropology, two books published in 1986 had a similarly destabilizing effect. The essays in James Clifford and George Marcus's *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* go far towards eroding confidence in the authority and objective value of 'classic' ethnographic accounts.[22] In his concurrent study *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, Marcus points out that classic ethnographies have often served less as an objective account of some 'other' culture than as an implied

[19] C. S. Lewis, 'The Anthropological Approach', in *English and Medieval Studies Presented to J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. by Norman Davis and C. L. Wrenn (London, 1962), pp. 219–30 (p. 219).

[20] John Speirs, *Medieval English Poetry: The Non-Chaucerian Tradition* (London, 1957), pp. 215–51.

[21] William H. McNeill, *Mythistory and Other Essays* (Chicago, 1986). McNeill develops a line of thought that has been explored by other historians going back to R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946).

[22] *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. by James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley, 1986).

critique of the researcher's own society and its norms.[23] This is a compelling criticism, seeing that such studies have long served as models for graduate students in anthropology, who customarily enter their profession via a year's immersion in a foreign culture and a written account of that experience. In a corresponding development in the field of archaeology, Ian Hodder's 1986 book *Reading the Past* waved entry to the brave new world of what has been called post-processual archaeology. In urging a turn away from what he considered to be the narrow scientism of the 'New Archaeology', with its reliance on quantifiable data and orderly systems and procedures, Hodder directed attention to the potentially erratic role played by the individual in the making of material culture.[24] By focusing on those ideological factors that are involved in human agency, Hodder and other like-minded archaeologists have sought to engage with questions of power and domination, of ranking and gender. They have approached material objects as symbols in action, to be read as part of a semiotic theory of culture by researchers who cannot hope to conceive of the past free from the biases that are a natural part of their own situation in time and space. To take a final example of new directions taken in books published in 1986, Richard Bauman's *Story, Performance, and Event* signalled a sharp turn in oral theory away from the analysis of texts, with their systems of formulaic diction, and towards the study of performative events.[25] Specialists in oral narrative have since widened their horizons so as to embrace contemporary performance theory, speech act theory, sociolinguistics, and ethnopoetics, with some attempt on the part of philologically oriented scholars to build bridges between these approaches and more firmly established modes of textual scholarship.[26]

[23] George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago, 1986). If this book has a parallel in Anglo-Saxon studies, it is Allen J. Frantzen's *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition* (New Brunswick, 1990), a similarly iconoclastic attempt to document the period-specific investments and biases that have influenced Anglo-Saxon scholarship from its beginnings to the present day.

[24] Ian Hodder, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology* (Cambridge, 1986). A second edition has since appeared (1991).

[25] Richard Baumann, *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative* (Cambridge, 1986). The significance of this landmark study was recognized in 2002 when an entire issue of the *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 115, no. 455, was devoted to a set of papers presented at the fifteenth anniversary of this publication.

[26] For example, John Miles Foley, *The Singer of Tales in Performance* (Bloomington, 1995).

One result of the intellectual ferment that characterizes publications of the kind that have just been named has been a questioning and, to some extent, a redrawing of the boundaries that customarily have separated history and literature, literature and anthropology, and anthropology and its various neighbours in the academy, including sociology, archaeology, and folklore.[27] Just as the world itself has been undergoing rapid modernization in recent years, the gaze of cultural anthropologists has shifted away from exotic societies so as to take in technologically advanced ones as well, thus encroaching on what was formerly the domain of sociology while holding fast to a concern with cognitive and conceptual models and with the behaviour of individuals interacting in small groups. The close, sceptical reading of texts — a skill once regarded as the special province of literary critics — is now applied to documents of all kinds, including obviously 'non-literary' ones. If one were to venture a slogan to sum up the mixed excitement and angst that characterize current work of a postmodern orientation in the humanities and social sciences, it could well be 'All the world's a text, and all scholars merely players'. It is not to be expected that every medievalist with training in traditional methods of philology and history will be equally pleased by this development.

Since the time of the revolution in critical sensibilities to which I have referred,[28] there has been a general acknowledgment that no scholarship is innocent. Judgements concerning past cultures are always articulated in terms of a contemporary language that is itself socially situated. This does not mean that all interpretations are equally valid. What it does mean is that when we argue for a specific textual interpretation, what we are really claiming is that our interpretation holds true within the hermeneutic system that we invoke at that time. This is a point that has been made repeatedly by those who have traced the emergence of Anglo-Saxon studies as a discipline, informed at every stage by period-specific investments on the part of those people who have made this field their intellectual home.[29]

If deployed with reason and good sense, I believe, the scholarly movements that have been summarized in the last paragraphs can point the way towards that

[27] Note in this connection *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and Giles B. Gunn (New York, 1992).

[28] The 'revolution' to which I refer has been a gradual change that began well before 1986, of course, just as it has continued to evolve since then, in a different manner in each discipline and with varying degrees of acceptance among people of intelligence and good sense. I single out that one year as a convenient aid to an argument, not as a precise claim about intellectual history.

[29] Frantzen, *Desire for Origins*; note also the essays included in *Anglo-Saxonism*.

new kind of medieval studies that I have called the anthropology of the past. Examining a document or artefact from the Anglo-Saxon period, we thus may want to discuss more than its formal and stylistic features, its manuscript context, its possible source or sources, and factors of a similar kind. We may also wish to discuss it in terms of an integrated theory of culture whereby any one element, as in human language, takes on meaning in relation to other elements. How did a decorated manuscript page display the power of the Church by making a display of expensive materials and fine craftsmanship? How did a well-wrought ship or sword assert the system of hierarchy and naturalize it for the sake of a particular leader or group? How did a particular poem — *Widsith*, for example — assert a people's identity by locating them vis-à-vis their predecessors in antiquity and their neighbours in space, thereby promoting certain ideological ends by controlling access to information? These are not just cynical questions meant to tear the veil of illusion from the face of power. They are inquiries designed to reveal the meaning of things by reference to the total cultural system in which they are embedded.

When approached along these lines, the historical past is revealed as a complex cultural construction — in part 'ours' and in part 'theirs' — rather than as a set of events that once occurred independent of the fact of their being observed. The past, in a real sense, is where we continue to dwell, to the extent that we dwell in human time, which is largely the creation of narrative. As Paul Ricoeur has noted, it is through narratives of human events — through stories of past experience, present experience, and potential experience — that the flux of existence is given teleological form so that present fact is acknowledged as the result of past activity and the prelude to future woe or bliss.[30] If this line of reasoning is accepted, then we must conclude that it is storytelling, and not just the general use of language as a system of communication, that chiefly defines human beings as such.[31] A strong case is thereby made for the anthropology of the past, for storytelling, or mythmaking, in the broad sense that is implied by the Greek noun *μῦθος* 'story', is an activity that falls in part within the province of anthropology as a science of humankind.

[30] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols, trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago, 1984–88), originally published as *Temps et récit* (Paris, 1983–85). Note also Ricoeur's essay 'The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality', trans. by David Pellauer (1979), repr. in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. by Mario J. Valdés (New York, 1991), pp. 117–36.

[31] This is the thesis of my 1999 study *Homo Narrans*.

There is thus more to the anthropology of the past than the ad-hoc forays that were once dismissed as 'the anthropological approach'. Despite Lewis's scepticism concerning the usefulness of anthropological models, one way to read early writings with a minimum of distortion is to supplement whatever knowledge can be gained through the traditional disciplines of medieval studies with knowledge based on observation of living phenomena. By maintaining an anthropologist's stubborn refusal to impose his or her own prejudices on others, we may remain attuned to the strangeness of the cultures of the past and may be more likely to recognize them as comprehensible systems that have their own integrity, independent of perceptual norms into which we as observers have been acculturated by the accident of our birth.

My focal point in this chapter is *Widsith*, however, and I will now return to that poem.

Widsith *and Anglo-Saxon Mythopoesis*

As has been said, I wish to approach *Widsith* as an indigenous Anglo-Saxon writing that derives its chief meaning from its relation to the society in which it emerged. Seen as such, it exemplifies a discursive practice that connected a tenth-century social order to an imagined prior period associated with racial or tribal origins. To the extent that *Widsith* incorporates history, it is best read as a competitive mythistory, in McNeill's sense. To the extent that it incorporates ethnographical knowledge, it is best taken as a work of cultural critique, in something like Marcus's sense. *Widsith* is of interest for the ways in which it synthesizes historical and geographical knowledge so as to justify an emergent Anglo-Saxon social order, lending that order the patina of antiquity while wrapping its controlling ethos in an aura of rightness or inevitability that derives from its articulation through the formal speech of the imagined poet-sage, Widsith himself, the celebrant of ancient kings.

Central to this reading of *Widsith* is the concept of social order as agonistic, as the result of a competitive process whereby, whether implicitly or explicitly, the interests of one group are always set against the interests of one or another rival group. This concept of social life as agon not only is taken for granted among most post-Marxist social scientists; it also was one of the Anglo-Saxons' most basic existential concepts.[32] The principle that life equals competition is expressed

[32] It should need no belabouring that the *Beowulf* poet portrays a ruthlessly competitive tribal world, as for that matter Bede does in the pages of his *Ecclesiastical History* or as the *Anglo-Saxon*

succinctly in the sixty-six lines of gnomic utterances that constitute the poetic text known as the Cotton Maxims, where we are told that 'leoht sceal wið þystrum, / fyrd wið fyrde, feond wið oðrum, / lað wið laþe ymb land sacan' (light must oppose darkness, / army oppose army, one enemy oppose another, foe against foe / struggling over land).[33] Such an attitude finds emphatic expression in the burial sites of early Anglo-Saxon England, with their inclusion of spears and other weapons as the identifying signs of a man. Weapons are the essential things (together with a supply of food and drink, apparently) that were to be borne with a man into the next world. That weapons were not merely decorative but were put to use at times is evident not only from those burial sites that reveal anatomical evidence of wounds,[34] but also from the annals of warfare and violence that are featured so prominently in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and other sources.[35] Equally clear from the archaeological record is that virtually all important inhabited sites were enclosed with defensive fortifications. The attempt on the part of the West Saxon kings to secure their territory and promote their territorial ambitions through an articulated system of defence based on the *burh*, or fortified town, is a firm expression of this tendency.[36] Nothing was secure in the Anglo-Saxon world, it seems; all good things had to be defended and, if possible, augmented, for all were potentially contested.

Chronicle does in its annals for virtually every period of pre-Conquest history. As if to ground the principle of strife in divine providence, the *Beowulf* poet embeds the violent plot that is featured in the first two-thirds of his poem into the context of a Great Feud that pits God against His eternal adversaries: see Marijane Osborn, 'The Great Feud: Scriptural History and Strife in *Beowulf*', *PMLA*, 93 (1978), 973–81.

[33] *Maxims II*, 51b–53; Dobbie, p. 57. On the strategic physical placement of *Maxims II* towards the head of London, British Library, Cotton MSS, Tiberius B I, where that poem is written out on fol. 115 just after the *Menologium* (a list of liturgical festivals) and just before the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, see Dobbie, pp. lx–lxi, and Fred C. Robinson, 'Old English Literature in its Most Immediate Context', in *Old English Literature in Context*, ed. by John D. Niles (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 11–29 (at pp. 26–28).

[34] S. J. Wenham, 'Anatomical Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Weapon Injuries', in *Weapons and Warfare in Anglo-Saxon Society*, ed. by Sonia Chadwick Hawkes (Oxford, 1989), pp. 123–39.

[35] For example, for the years 900, 903, 909–10, 913–14, 917, 934, 937, 942, 943 (D), 945, 948 (D, E), 952 (D), 966 (D), 969 (D), 978 (D), 980–82 (C), 988 (C), 991, 992–94 (C), and 997–99 (C), to cite only tenth-century annals. For a convenient collation of translations of these annals, see *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Revised Translation*, ed. by Dorothy Whitelock (London, 1961), pp. 58–85. My references are to the dates in the A version unless noted otherwise.

[36] F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1971), pp. 264–65 and 335–36; *The Defence of Wessex: The Burghal Hidage and Anglo-Saxon Fortifications*, ed. by David Hill and Alexander R. Rumble (Manchester, 1996).

In keeping with the overwhelmingly defensive and agonistic attitudes that were characteristic of its time, *Widsith* can be regarded as a kind of mental battlefield, a place where claims about the past, that priceless possession, are publicly asserted in words whose bland facade, varied by occasional rhetorical extravagance, conceals the aggressive design that is part of any desire for eminence. By listing name after name of rulers in a manner analogous to the listing of ancestor after ancestor in genealogies — that other great weapon of social memory — the poet reduces historical discourse to close to its minimal limits in the direction of gnomic verse. Just as the Exeter Book maxims confirm the natural order of the world by naming its elements and their properties — 'forst sceal freosan, fyr wudu meltan' (frost has the property of freezing, fire consumes wood)[37] — so the poet of *Widsith* makes unarguable claims about the social order by naming the peoples of the earth and identifying their most famous rulers: 'Ætla weold Hunum, Eormanric Gotum' (Attila ruled the Huns, Eormanric the Goths, 18). The power that the poet exercises is thus the same power that he ascribes to his fictive speaker Widsith, that singer from the legendary past: he raises up the fame of particular chieftains or kings at the expense of rival figures, the great majority of whom remain nameless, part of the soil of oblivion. The form of the list, that blunt mnemonic weapon, permits the poet to naturalize fame as if it were a part of the eternal order of things rather than a cultural construction, as with hindsight we know it to be.

From a present-day perspective, Widsith's choice of a tribe or ruler to call into existence through naming does sometimes seem almost inevitable, as when he names Ætla (alias Attila) as *the* Hun of history or cites Guthhere (alias the Gunther of *Nibelungenlied* fame) as the archetypal king of the Burgundians and, we are told, his own personal benefactor (65–67). At other times the poet's identifications are subject to strain, as when we are told that 'Þeodric weold Froncum' (Theodoric ruled the Franks, 24a). If, thanks to other conduits of fame than this poem, a reader should know of alternative kings of Frankish origin — need one mention Charlemagne? — the *Widsith* poet says nothing about them. 'One tribe, one king' is his rule of thumb, and he usually sticks to it as if it were a feature of life rather than of the rhetoric of the list. Some tribes do not merit named kings. In lines 57–87, with their formulaic syntax *Ic wæs mid* . . . 'I spent time with . . .', one tribe after another is named with no mention of its archetypal ruler. The Scots and Picts go kingless (79a), as comes as no surprise in what is not only an English poem but also a kind of English propaganda-piece. In any period of

[37] *Maxims I*, 71, ed. by Krapp and Dobbie, p. 159.

historical conflict, *damnatio memoriae* 'the effacing of social memory' has been a favoured means by which the victors have controlled knowledge and the vanquished have settled into oblivion. Kinglessness is also the lot of the *[W]icingas* 'Vikings' (59), who are named collectively by the poet in passing but who remain without the honour of a named ruler. Perhaps more curiously, ancient tribes including the Israelites, Assyrians, Egyptians, Medes, and Persians lack named kings (82–84a). It seems that in *Widsith*, named archetypal rulers are chiefly associated with that period of northern European history that was so much the creation of heroic legend that modern scholars have called it the Heroic Age. It is perhaps in part for this reason that the Saxons are named without being ascribed a specific king (62a). Like the Scots, the Picts, and the Vikings, the Saxons were part of the poet's contemporary tenth-century world. For reasons that will become clearer later on in this essay, the poet prefers not to speak of Saxon glory in the past tense.

When the kings who are named in the poem are also briefly characterized, the profile that the poet gives them sometimes steers the audience towards an understanding of the relative stature of rulers in a manner that suggests ranking among their latter-day descendants. When the poet names Offa as the archetypal king of the Continental Angles, for example, he links this king to Alewih, the putative archetypal king of the Danes, in a manner that sheds glory on the Danes with one hand and takes it away with the other:

> Offa weold Ongle, Alewih Denum;
> se wæs þara manna modgast ealra,
> no hwæþre he ofer Offan eorlscype fremede,
> ac Offa geslog ærest monna,
> cnihtwesende, cynerica mæst.
> Nænig efeneald him eorlscipe maran
> on orette. (lines 35–41a)

> (Offa ruled the Angles, Alewih the Danes. He [Alewih] was the bravest of all of those men. In no way, though, did he surpass Offa in noble deeds, but Offa, the foremost among men, won the greatest of kingdoms while still a boy. No one of his age [ever performed] greater deeds of strength in battle.)

Widsith does not just incorporate Anglo-Saxon knowledge about the past. It filters knowledge so as to settle, in a desired manner, one group's rivalries with others. In this instance, as in a famous allusion to Offa that is interjected into the narrative of *Beowulf*,[38] the speaker's praise of Offa, the legendary king of the Continental Angles, is generally taken to be a means of honouring Offa II, the

[38] Lines 1954b–60a; Klaeber, pp. 195–98. This scene is discussed at pp. 37–38 above.

historical king who ruled over Mercia from AD 757 to 796. By extension, the allusion honours the descendants of Offa II in a kingdom and a royal line that had been folded into Wessex by the end of the ninth century through a process of conquest, assimilation, and dynastic intermarriage. By a similar argument, the speaker's praise of Alewih, the archetypal king of the Danes, ought to reflect credit on that king's latter-day Anglo-Danish descendants. To an extent it does, but not without reservation. Not only is Alewih said to be inferior to Offa in the performance of heroic deeds. In addition, he is literally a nonentity, a name alone, for such a king is unknown in historical sources outside this poem.[39] The Danes are therefore belittled through the medium of praise. They are a great tribe ruled by a brave nobody.

Certain tribes and rulers thus come off better than others in the poet's implicit rankings. King Guthhere receives special notice for his gift of a handsome *beag* 'ring' or 'torque' to the itinerant singer Widsith (65–67). His Burgundians, a tribe of legendary wealth, thereby come off well. King Ælfwine, the Alboin of historians writing in Latin,[40] merits five lines of high praise for his generous hand (70–74). His people, the inhabitants of *Eatule* 'Italy', thus come out near the top in the high-stakes poetic competition where fame is what counts. With these figures a simple rule seems to be in force: the more lines of verse the poet devotes to a person, the higher his stature can be taken to be.

Among all these peoples, the tribe that wins the poet's sweepstakes of praise is the Goths. This fact should arouse no surprise, for it is this tribe, as Chambers remarks, that 'had done or suffered so much that their heroes became household names' throughout the German-speaking areas of Europe.[41] The *Widsith* poet

[39] An *Alweo*, however, appears in the genealogy of the Mercian kings as a nephew of the great historical king Penda; see Chambers, *Widsith*, p. 203 (note).

[40] See Chambers, *Widsith*, pp. 123–26. The career of Alboin is recounted in detail, after more than two centuries of legendary accretion, by Paulus Diaconus in his *Historia Langobardorum*, bk 1, chs 23–27 and bk 2, chs 1–14 and 25–28; for a translation, see Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards*, ed. by Edward Peters (Philadelphia, 1974).

[41] Chambers, *Widsith*, pp. 10–11. For information bearing on legends of the Goths and King Eormanric/Ermanaric, see Caroline A. Brady, 'The Eormanric of the *Wīdsīð*', *University of California Publications in English*, 3 (1937), 225–36, and Brady, *The Legends of Ermanaric* (Berkeley, 1943), with references to Old English poetry on pp. 149–76. Translations of basic sources for the study of this king are included in Garmonsway and Simpson, pp. 265–85. Two recent studies providing detailed information about the Goths and their history are Herwig Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, trans. by Thomas J. Dunlap (Berkeley, 1988) and Peter Heather, *The Goths* (Oxford, 1996). On pp. 1–3, Wolfram reviews attempts by various national groups to

names either the Goths or Eormanric no fewer than five times. It is worth looking at each of those instances in brief.

(1) In lines 5b–9a, Widsith is introduced as someone famed chiefly for having visited the court of Eormanric, here called, with some moral ambiguity, both a *Hreðcyning* 'glorious king', or perhaps 'Hrethking',[42] and a *wraþ wærloga* 'furious troth-breaker'.

(2) In line 18, the status of Eormanric as the archetypal king of the Goths is firmly established: *Eormanric* [*weold*] *Gotum* 'Eormanric ruled the Goths'.

(3) In line 57 the poet links the Goths and the Huns in a single clause: 'Ic wæs mid Hunum ond mid Hreðgotum' (I was with the Huns and the glorious Goths). To anyone in the poet's audience who was knowledgeable about the past, this one line would have called to mind one of the most famous episodes of northern European history, the invasion and conquest of Eormanric's Gothic empire by an army of Huns led by Attila.[43]

(4) Towards the end of the poem, the poet recites a catalogue of persons, culminating in Wudga (Widia) and Hama, who formed the *innweorud* 'inner circle' of Eormanric's court (lines 109–30). Like any catalogue of heroes, this passage serves the function of auxesis; it marks out as a person of fame and splendour the king around whom such a glorious retinue has gathered. Moreover, the passage celebrates the legendary valour of these men on the field of war (lines 119b–22 and 125–30).

(5) The main allusion to Eormanric comes in a twenty-one-line passage (lines 88–108) that directly precedes the catalogue of heroes that has just been mentioned. This is easily the most extended narrative passage in the poem. Because of its importance for my argument, the first part of it is worth quoting in full.

> Ond ic wæs mid Eormanrice ealle þrage,
> þær me Gotena cyning gode dohte;
> se me beag forgeaf, burgwarena fruma,
> on þam siex hund wæs smætes goldes,

appropriate the name and fame of the Goths during the period from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century. Neither Wolfram nor Heather mentions *Widsith*, nor does either author discuss early medieval manifestations of 'Gothicism'.

[42] Although I favour the first translation, the choice of either one makes little difference to my argument.

[43] See Chambers, *Widsith*, pp. 45–48 and 253–54. The war of the Goths against the Huns is also explicitly mentioned in lines 119b–22, where the poet praises the valour of the Goths in defending their *ealdne eþelstol* 'ancient homeland' (122a) against Attila's tribes.

gescyred sceatta scillingrime;
þone ic Eadgilse on æht sealde,
minum hleodryhtne, þa ic to ham bicwom,
leofum to leane, þæs þe he me lond forgeaf,
mines fæder eþel, frea Myrginga.
Ond me þa Ealhhild oþerne forgeaf,
dryhtcwen duguþe, dohtor Eadwines.
Hyre lof lengde geond londa fela,
þonne ic be songe secgan sceolde
hwær ic under swegle selast wisse
goldhrodene cwen giefe bryttian. (lines 88–102)

(And I was with Eormanric all the time; there the king of the Goths rewarded me bountifully. Lord of cities and their inhabitants, he gave me an armlet worth six hundred shillings counted out in coins of refined gold. Once I returned home I gave that armlet as a present to my dear lord and protector Eadgils, lord of the Myrgings, as recompense for his granting me my father's estate. And Ealhhild, the noble queen, the daughter of Eadwine, graciously gave me a second armlet. Her praise was exalted throughout many lands whenever it was my task to give voice in song and say where I had found the finest gold-adorned queen giving out treasure.)

Among many details of interest in this passage — the way in which praise, gifts, and land operate as parts of a single social economy, for example — there are two mysteries, as well. First: why does mention of Eormanric lead directly to mention of the generous queen Ealhhild? What is the purpose of this prominent notice of a person who is unknown outside this poem? Second: why, in line 96 of this passage, following up on information that is given in the poem's introductory lines,[44] is Widsith identified as a 'Myrging'? What is the point of that tribal identification, seeing that the Myrgings too are otherwise unknown? I shall try to cast light on each of these problems in turn.

From the passage quoted above, all that can be inferred about Ealhhild other than that she is Widsith's benefactor and a person of royal standing is that she is the daughter of a certain Eadwine. Seeing that Eadwine too is unknown outside the poem, this information would seem to add little to one's understanding of the passage. Such is not the case, however, for somewhat earlier in the poem, the generous King Ælfwine (that is, Alboin, the ruler of Italy) is also identified as *bearn Eadwines* 'the son of Eadwine' (74b). If the Eadwine of verse 98b is the same man as the Eadwine of verse 74b, as can be taken for granted in the absence of

[44] 'Him from Myrgingum / æþele onwocon' (his noble lineage derived from the Myrgings, 4b–5a).

information that would rule otherwise,[45] then it follows that in the 'mythistory' of *Widsith*, Queen Ealhhild of the Goths and King Ælfwine of Italy are siblings born of the same father. Later I will return to this significant point. For now, let us see what is implied by the poem's main narrative.

Widsith states that it was in the company of Ealhhild, that *fælre freoþuwebbban* 'gracious peace-weaver' (6a), that he first travelled to Eormanric's court *eastan of Ongle* 'from the east, from Angeln' (8a). What this statement must mean in the context of northern European geography is that Widsith journeyed into the land of the Goths from the ancient home of the Angles in the lower part of the peninsula of Jutland, a site that lies directly to the east of Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, and East Anglia.[46] There is general agreement that the purpose of this journey to the court of this most famous of Gothic kings can only have been to present Ealhhild, who must be imagined as a princess of royal blood, in marriage to King Eormanric.[47] The implication of lines 88–102 is that it is in return for this high-stakes escort service, and not just for his fine singing, that Widsith is rewarded so handsomely by both Eormanric and his bride. Since Ealhhild's point of departure is Angeln, she must be an Anglian princess. Her father Eadwine, like Offa, must be an Anglian king. The conclusion follows that the main narrative of *Widsith* concerns a supposed marriage that forges an alliance between the Angles — the

[45] Chambers, *Widsith*, pp. 123–24, concludes that there is no doubt that Eadwine and his son Ælfwine 'are the Audoin and Alboin under whom the Lombard people emerge again into the light of history', particularly in the pages of Paul the Deacon's history. Malone (*Widsith*, p. 140) holds that 'for chronological reasons' the two references to Eadwine cannot be to the same man, but the search for precise historical chronology in a poem of this character is hazardous at best. See on this point David P. Henige, *The Chronology of Oral Tradition: Search for a Chimera* (Oxford, 1974). By rejecting the information the *Widsith* poet gives us concerning Ælfwine's parentage, Malone declines to acknowledge a connection between the Angles and Italy. Even Chambers, who accepts this information, does nothing further with it.

[46] The adverb *ēastan* situates the narrator's point of view at some point to the west of Angeln, as would suit a speaker from the British Isles; see Krapp and Dobbie, p. xlv. Verse 8a is exceptional as the one point in *Widsith* where the reader is impelled to adopt a British insular perspective.

[47] Chambers, *Widsith*, pp. 21–28, argues this point persuasively. Malone (*Widsith*, p. 141) makes the alternative suggestion that Ealhhild was already Ermanaric's queen and that there was no wedding journey. This reading must be rejected on syntactical grounds if one accepts the natural construction of lines 5b–8, 'he mid Ealhhilde [. . .] ham gesohte [. . .] Eormanrices' (with Ealhhild, he [Widsith] sought out Eormanric's home). In addition to being questionable on grammatical grounds, Malone's reading of these lines would leave the purpose of Widsith's trip unexplained. Brady, *Legends of Ermanaric*, pp. 169–70 n. 7, finds Malone's interpretation 'utterly at variance with the text'.

Continental ancestors of the *Angelþeod* (the English people) in general and of the Mercian branch of the English people in particular — and the most famous of the kings and tribes of northern Europe.[48]

From an English perspective, the first effect of the poet's narrative concerning Ealhhild and her marriage to King Eormanric is to raise the status of the Angles by marrying them into the Goths, whose stature they thereby approximate. Such an attempt to link English and Gothic history is a natural expression of the 'Gothicism' that Roberta Frank has shown to have been in vogue by the ninth century in Europe, though not necessarily during earlier times.[49] By the time that *Widsith* was composed, it seems, a Gothic connection had become a prestigious thing for an English ruler to have. The glamour of the Goths is reflected in other Old English poetry of this period, as one can see from the prominent references to Theodoric and Eormanric in the Exeter Book poem known as *Deor* (lines 18–19 and 21–26, respectively), to Theodoric and Widia in one of the fragments of *Waldere* (pt 2, lines 4–10), and to Eormanric and Hama in one of the passages of *Beowulf* that touch on the legendary past (lines 1197–1201). Despite his high status in the annals of northern legendry, however, Eormanric remains a morally ambiguous figure. The author of *Deor* remembers him as a *grim cyning* 'ferocious king' (23b) who is known for his *wylfenne geþoht* 'wolfish disposition' (22a), in probable allusion to the marriage to which reference is made in *Widsith*. This marriage will come to a savage end. To judge from the second simplex in her name (*-hild*), the Ealhhild of *Widsith* is almost certainly this poet's equivalent to the Sunilda of the Latin history of Jordanes, who is the same person as the hapless Svanhildr of Scandinavian tradition. This is the woman whom Ermanaric (the Iørmunrekkr of Old Norse sources) punishes for her supposed treachery or infidelity by having her trampled to death by horses.[50] Chambers reasonably concludes that it is with reference to this brutal act, which in the Scandinavian branch of the story involves the breach of marital vows, that the Eormanric of *Widsith* is called a *wraþ wærloga* 'cruel trothbreaker'.[51] Unlike the more civilized

[48] Malone rejects this interpretation on the grounds that no king named Eadwine appears in the Mercian royal genealogy (*Widsith*, p. 141). In view of how easily both history and genealogy can be manipulated for political ends, however, his objection carries little weight. Surely the poet who invented Widsith could also invent an Anglian princess to accompany that fictive singer to the land of the Goths.

[49] Frank, 'Germanic Legend in Old English Literature', pp. 93–94.

[50] Chambers, *Widsith*, pp. 15–20.

[51] Chambers, *Widsith*, p. 24.

Angles, the Goths are capable of terrifying violence. They typify the magnificent yet threatening alterity of the ancient pagan tribes of northern Europe. The narrative about Ealhhild's marriage to Eormanric thus not only enhances the status of the English; it also raises their moral stature by suggesting their ethical superiority to the Goths. Eormanric can be admired for his wealth and generosity but remains an archetype of rage and murder. His queen remains blameless, as do the Angles by their association with her.

We are now in a better position to understand the second of the two mysteries to which I have referred. This is the identification of Widsith as a Myrging.

'Who are the Myrgings?', we may well ask. After reviewing the arguments for one or another identity for this tribe, Joyce Hill concludes that the *Widsith* poet's references to the Myrgingas 'remain something of a puzzle'.[52] The name itself — a curious name that might denote 'bog-dwellers', or 'dwellers in a watery district' — has been thought to point towards the North Sea littoral zone and perhaps more specifically towards West Holstein,[53] but speculation based on the word's supposed etymology or connotations would be futile. Like the identification of Alewih as king of the Danes and of Ealhhild and her father Eadwine as members of the Anglian royal family, this is not a name that can be clarified by any other text, and we must look to *Widsith* alone to understand it. In lines 42–44, in the most pertinent reference to the Myrgings,[54] we are told that they are the neighbours of the Angles to the south and are either identical with or intimately allied with the Swæfe, or people of Suevic (or Suebic, or Swabian) stock. When Offa is said to have 'won the greatest of kingdoms while still a boy' (38–39), we are told that he confirmed his triumph by establishing the frontier with the Myrgings at 'Fifeldor', a place-name that is generally thought to refer to the mouth of the river Eider:[55]

> Ane sweorde
> merce gemærde wið Myrgingum
> bi Fifeldore; heoldon forð siþþan
> Engle ond Swæfe, swa hit Offa geslog. (lines 41b–44)

[52] *Old English Minor Heroic Poems*, ed. by Joyce Hill (Durham, 1983), p. 95.

[53] *Widsith*, ed. by Malone, pp. 185–86. Langenfelt, 'Studies on Widsith', pp. 83–86, finds the name 'indeed, a puzzle', but speculates that etymologically it means 'the brilliant'. Neither Langenfelt's etymology nor Malone's is compelling.

[54] The name 'Myrgings' also figures twice in lines 84–85, where it appears alongside mention of the historical Medes and Persians and the unidentifiable 'Mofdings' and 'Amothings'. It is hard to tell what to make of this collocation of historical names and invented ones.

[55] Chambers, *Widsith*, p. 204 (n. to line 43); *Widsith*, ed. by Malone, p.149.

> (With a single sword [i.e. in single combat?] he fixed the border against the Myrgings at Fifeldor. Afterwards the Angles and the Swæfe kept to that boundary just as Offa marked it out.)

Here the Myrgings and the Swæfe are associated with one another, and both peoples seem to be regarded as bordering the territory of the Angles to the immediate south. Chambers is inclined to take the two groups to be 'the same people, the Myrgingas counting as one branch of the wide-spread Suevic stock'.[56]

Regardless of how their exact relationship is imagined, one point is clear: the land that the Myrging/Swæfe people or peoples occupy is coterminous with Saxon territory.[57] According to the Anglo-Saxons' own myth of migration, it was from this region, immediately south of Angeln, that the Saxons migrated to Britain, and modern scholarship has confirmed that conclusion.[58] Whether or not one believes (as some scholars have held) that the Myrging/Swæfe people or peoples are Saxons under other names,[59] there is an obvious connection to Anglo-Saxon England here, just as there is in the lines that praise King Offa of the Continental Angles as a famous boundary-maker, in a possible allusion to the famous Mercian

[56] Chambers, *Widsith*, pp. 204–05 (n. to line 44). While Chambers's conclusion may be justified, it is not clear just how the poet conceives of the two groups in relation to one another. In lines 22–23a — 'Witta weold Swæfum, [...] Meaca Myrgingum' (Witta ruled the Swæfe, [...] Meaca the Myrgings) — the poet ascribes two different kings to them as if they were two separate tribes.

[57] *Widsith*, ed. by Malone, pp. 183–86.

[58] See on this topic Nicholas Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Haven, 1989). Some historical details relating to the migration are addressed by the contributors to *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, ed. by Steven Bassett (Leicester, 1989). It is far beside my point to argue the particulars of the Anglo-Saxon migrations and to try to sort out the geography and the complex and shifting ethnicities that those migrations involved. Worth noting, however, is that the Swæfe seem to have had a place in the settlement of Britain, and their presence there is consistent with my understanding of lines 43b–44. The twin villages of Swaffam Prior and Swaffam Bulbeck in Cambridgeshire and the village of Swaffam in Norfolk, for example, owe the first part of their names (Old English *Swafham* or *Swæfham*) to the tribal name *Swæfe*; see Eilert Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* (Oxford, 1960), s.v. *Swaffham*. I am grateful to Audrey Meaney for this information. Also worth noting in connection with possible Suevic presence in England are several personal names of the late seventh century. These are the kings or royal cadets named *Swæfheard* and *Swæfred* (or *Swefred*) who ruled the East Saxons and possibly the people of Kent during this period: see David Dumville, 'Essex, Middle Anglia, and the Expansion of Mercia in the South-East Midlands', in *Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, ed. by Bassett, pp. 123–40 (at pp. 136–38).

[59] For references, see *Widsith*, ed. by Malone, p. 183 (n. on *Myrgingas*).

boundary known as 'Offa's Dyke'.[60] This English connection virtually leaps forth when we take account of the King Witta who is mentioned in verse 22a, 'Witta weold Swæfum' (Witta ruled the Swæfe). There can be little doubt that this is the same Witta whom both Bede and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* identify as the grandfather of the brothers Hengest and Horsa.[61] These brothers were renowned as the conquerors of Kent, and Hengest in particular, in the eyes of later generations, came to be regarded as the chief founder of Anglo-Saxon England.

Information given in *Widsith* that at first seems inconsequential or opaque can thus be seen to have a construable purpose. Latter-day rivalries and accommodations between the Mercians (that Anglian people) and their southern neighbours the Saxons (who had merged politically with the people of Kent by the time that King Alfred came to the throne) are parallelled in this poem by imagined relations between Offa's Angles and their neighbours to the south, the Myrging/Swæfe people or peoples. Neither Mercians nor Saxons living during the turbulent years of the ninth and tenth centuries would have had difficulty in recognizing the genealogical links that connected their present-day ruling families with the legendary kings Offa and Witta who are named in the *Widsith*-poet's roll-call of famous people from the past. As the poet makes clear, the territories of those two ancient kings adjoined one another by opposite banks of the river Eider (see the map, p. 137), just as their descendants' territories adjoined one another by opposite banks of the river Thames. History thus serves as a mirror image of the present.

Wherever we look in *Widsith*, we see evidence of similar creative ethnicity.[62] Widsith himself, the singer who is 'of the noble lineage of the Myrgings', is one of the most striking examples of this tendency. Widsith is not just a member of an

[60] Modern archaeologists are not convinced that 'Offa's Dyke' was actually built under the direction of King Offa of Mercia. If, however, whether rightly or wrongly, that earthwork was indeed popularly identified with that King during the tenth century, then the boundary-making that is attributed to the Offa of *Widsith* may be a projection, backward into time, of the deeds of his latter-day namesake.

[61] 'Duces fuisse perhibentur eorum primi duo fratres Hengist et Horsa [. . .]. Erant autem filii Uictgisli, cuius pater Uitta, cuius pater Uecta, cuius pater Uoden [. . .]' (Their first leaders are said to have been two brothers, Hengist and Horsa [. . .]. They were the sons of Wihtgisl, son of Witta, son of Wecta, son of Woden [. . .]). Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1:15; Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 50–51. See also *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, version E (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc 636), *sub anno* 449.

[62] See *Creative Ethnicity: Symbols and Strategies of Contemporary Ethnic Life*, ed. by Stephen Stern and John Allan Cicala (Logan, 1991).

otherwise unknown and forgettable tribe; he looks very much like a proto-Saxon. As a member of a tribe of Suebic stock, he is associated with the southern English who traced their royal lineage back through Hengest to Witta. In addition, as a benefactor of the royal family of the Angles by virtue of his mission to the potentially dangerous land of the Goths, he is associated also with the northern English who traced their royal lineage back to Offa of Angeln. Whether it is his ethnicity or his life story that we pause to consider, he anchors the poem's pro-English bias. This bias extends to the names that are ascribed to the main actors in the poem's central narrative fiction. As R. L. Reynolds has observed, the names of Widsith's king (Eadgils), his female patron (Ealhhild), and that woman's father (Eadwine) are typical tenth-century English names. Similar names (Eadwine, Eadweard, Eadmund, Eadgar, Eadred, and Eadhild) are attested among members of the West Saxon royal family during this period.[63] To judge from both onomastics and geography, these are 'our' people as opposed to the foreign Ætlas and Cælics, the exotic Glommas and Woingas and Hundingas[64] that figure elsewhere in the poem. Praise of Widsith as a man of distinguished birth (4b–5a), unparalleled experience of the world (2–3a), exceptional riches and high connections (3b–4a, 56, 65b–67, 70–74, 88–102), and unrivalled skill as a singer (103–08) turns him into a 'heroic I', not just a vagabond minstrel. His character is in keeping with what one would expect of a self-respecting ancestor of the English Saxons, who by the early tenth century had come to dominate the political landscape of Britain. Just as the poet honours the noble ancestry of the Anglian line of kings through his capsule narratives of King Offa and Princess Ealhhild, he affirms the eminence of people of Saxon descent or affiliations through the device of his fictive speaker, Widsith. Widsith the proto-Saxon is the privileged person who ranges over the known world and calls past time into being through the rhythmic intonations of his lists of names. His own name, 'Far-Journey' (a transparent pseudonym) is suggestive of his identity as a person who embodies virtually all geographical and historical

[63] R. L. Reynolds, 'Le poème anglo-saxon *Widsith*: Réalité et fiction', *Le Moyen Âge*, 59 (1953), 299–324 (at p. 321). There is little reason, however, to follow Reynolds in using this onomastic fact to draw conclusions about the date of the poem, nor are there good grounds for identifying Princess Ealhhild with the Eadhild whom William of Malmesbury names as the sister of King Æthelstan and the Queen of Hugues le Grand of France, as Reynolds does in his study 'Eadhild, duchesse de la *Francia* et Ealhhild, patronne du *scop* de *Widsith*', *Le Moyen Âge*, 61 (1955), 281–89.

[64] One wonders if the 'Hundingas', in particular, are cousins of the 'Healfhundingas' (Latin *Cynocephali* 'dog-headed people') who figure in the Old English books of marvels known as *The Wonders of the East*, the *Passion of St Christopher*, and *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*.

knowledge that is worth having. He has travelled everywhere and seen everyone. Without his voice being raised, without his personal consent to one's place in the archive of information that he controls, no one who has lived in the legendary past is anyone.

Moreover, according to the poet's audacious pseudo-history, without Widsith's having acted as escort for the royal princess Ealhhild, her strategic marriage to Eormanric might not have taken place, and northern history would not have been the same. Widsith is thus not just a recorder of names, a memory artist. He is also presented as a shaper of events, a man of wealth, birth, and talent. In addition to owning the spectacular *beag* he received from Ealhhild's hand, he also, in exchange for a second such *beag*, has come into possession of the substantial estate that his father, 'lord of the Myrgings', had owned before him (95b–96).

The poem's pro-English bias even encompasses Rome and its conquerors. To return to a point noted earlier, one astonishing feature of *Widsith*'s catalogue of names is that King Ælfwine is said to be the ruler of *Eatule* 'Italy'. In other words, the same man whom Paul the Deacon calls Alboin and identifies as the conqueror of Italy is here identified as the son of Eadwine, and therefore the brother of that same Princess Ealhhild who has been the speaker's benefactor:

> Swylce ic wæs on Eatule mid Ælfwine,
> se hæfde moncynnes, mine gefræge,
> leohteste hond lofes to wyrcenne,
> heortan unhneaweste hringa gedales,
> beorhtra beaga, bearn Eadwines. (lines 70–74)
>
> (Likewise I was in Italy with Ælfwine. He, as I have heard — the son of Eadwine — had the lightest hand of all humankind when it came to winning praise, the least niggardly heart at the distribution of rings, bright treasures.)

Implied in these lines, when they are read in the light of information we are given elsewhere concerning the house of Eadwine, is a pseudo-historical claim that is just as audacious as the claim that it was an Anglian princess who married Eormanric: namely, that it is a king of Anglian birth, not a Lombard, who has come to rule over Italy and who, as the heir to Roman affluence, deals out treasures there with an unstinting hand. With one wave of a genealogical wand, Rome has been made subject to an English coup. Although the name Ælfwine is clearly equivalent to the Latin name Alboin, there is no evidence that the *Widsith*-poet conceives of Ælfwine as a Lombard. Instead, improbable as this claim may seem to us today, that famous conqueror is absorbed into the ranks of Angles who conquered Rome.

As for the homeland of the Lombards, it remains obscure. At two points elsewhere in the poem the Lombards are noticed (at 32b and 80b), but without mention of their conquering or inhabiting Italy. Instead, in yet another coup, they

too are drawn into the Anglo-Saxon orbit. In verse 32b they are ascribed a ruler named Sceaf: 'Sceafa [weold] Longbeardum' (Sceaf ruled the Lombards). This too is significant information, for as is well known, a king named Scef or Sceaf figures prominently in the West Saxon royal genealogies, where he figures as an ancestral king of that line who reigned (according to which account one prefers) either directly before the Scyld who was the founder of the Scylding line of kings (that is, the 'Scyld Scefing', 'Scyld son of Sceaf ' of *Beowulf*) or at some other time in prehistory.[65] The *Widsith* poet thus characterizes the Lombards as one of many interrelated tribes from which the rulers and people of Anglo-Saxon England could trace their descent. It is significant that, as Alexander Callander Murray has pointed out, 'the Lombards themselves knew of no Scef as far as we know, and he is best seen as "English" no matter where he is located'.[66]

When each of these various allusions is approached in isolation, it might be thought to bear no particular significance. What do they add up to when taken together?

What we find on display in *Widsith*, it seems, is a Europe that has taken on the contours of a 'greater Anglia' and has become a playground for people of English blood and connections. By telling of an Anglian king, Eadwine, whose daughter and son are destined for greatness in northern and southern Europe, respectively, the *Widsith* poet projects ancestors of the English into each of two crucial events of late antiquity: the rise and fall of Ermanaric's Gothic empire, and the eventual fall of Rome as a result of the onslaught of Alboin's barbarians. 'I was there myself, in the court of both kings', Widsith asserts with his great tongue-in-cheek lie, as if he had observed those momentous events side by side with these paragons of northern legendry despite the chronological absurdity of this claim.[67]

The main point of the poem, as we can now see, is neither to make a showy display of historical knowledge nor simply to play with the materials of the past, as the author does sometimes seem to delight in doing. Rather, it is to assert and naturalize a set of claims to status. When the Danes are introduced into the

[65] These creative genealogies have received much attention of late. On the cultural work done by them, see especially Davis, 'Cultural Assimilation in the Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies'.

[66] Alexander Callander Murray, '*Beowulf*, the Danish Invasions, and Royal Genealogy', in *The Dating of Beowulf*, ed. by Chase, pp. 101–11 (p. 106, n. 24). On Scyld and Scef, see also p. 32 above, note 47.

[67] The reign of Ermanaric is dated to about the third quarter of the fourth century AD. Alboin is believed to have reigned from AD 565 to 572. According to clerical chronology, a lapse of about two hundred years therefore separates the two rulers.

political landscape of *Widsith* through their imagined archetypal king Alewih, that King is made into a foil for Offa. By extension, Offa's high standing sheds lustre on his people and on their descendants, the *Angelþeod*. When the Goths are introduced to the poem at length, chiefly through mention of Eormanric, it is in connection with a marriage that allies that famous king with a princess of Anglian blood in a story that implies her moral advantage. When Italy is named, then with a sleight-of-hand so deft that it has escaped scholarly attention, its archetypal king is ascribed Anglian birth. When the Lombards are mentioned, they too are ascribed an archetypal king of the West Saxon royal line. When mention is made of the non-English-speaking inhabitants of the Isle of Britain — that is, the Picts and Scots, for the Welsh are nowhere openly mentioned[68] — it is in an offhand manner that denies them individual leadership, so that their contribution to British identity is effaced. And who is the master of ceremonies of this whole affair, the person who selects every detail of this 'confusion of history and chronology',[69] as it has perhaps ungenerously been called, and sets it into an order that maximizes English interests? Widsith the *meistersinger*, the poet's fictive alter-ego from the past. Through this playful bit of ventriloquism, late Anglo-Saxon knowledge about history and geography, informed by an emergent sense of English nationhood and pride in the English royal family, finds narrative expression in an act of mythopoesis whereby a desired order of things is projected into a formative period of the past.[70]

Poetry as Ritualized Discourse

As a compendium of knowledge about the peoples and rulers of former times, *Widsith* is a *writing*, to return to that neutral term. Despite its technical qualities

[68] The *Widsith* poet makes two references to the British inhabitants of the Roman Empire, the first while mentioning his travels *mid Rumwalum* 'with the inhabitants of Roman Britain (?)' (69b), and the second when mentioning Caesar, who ruled over *Wala rices* 'the realm of the British' (78b). The second of these references could possibly encompass the kingdom of Wales. The first could conceivably do so as well, even though the primary reference is to Roman Britain.

[69] Krapp and Dobbie, p. xlv.

[70] By 'mythopoesis' I mean to refer to the process by which tales about the past are created, are told and retold, and are incorporated into a system of belief in a manner that explains and justifies the present order of things. Cf. Marshall Sahlin's use of the term 'mytho-praxis' in his study 'Other Times, Other Customs: The Anthropology of History', *American Anthropology*, 85 (1983), 526–33.

as alliterative verse, its ploy of being chiefly the actual words of a singer of ancient times, and its use of rhetorical features that are characteristic of oral thought,[71] the poem can usefully be evaluated side by side with other historical and geographical writings of the tenth-century period during which it was apparently in circulation.[72] More or less obviously, these various and sundry texts illustrate a connection between state-formation and the use of writing. Large political entities can sometimes be founded through force of arms, but they cannot be maintained except through stable long-term administration of the kind that writing facilitates. In addition, a state cannot function well unless the idea of that political unit is widely available and is deeply impressed into the consciousness of its members. Furthermore, an ethos of enlightened governance, together with practical models of conduct for rulers and ruled alike, must be available for all members of society to share. The arts of writing have a key place not just in the details of administering a state, but also in that spiritual process by which a state becomes a viable concept, worthy of the effort that is required to bring it into being and maintain it on a daily basis.[73]

Like coinage, that succinct genre of iconography, the art of inscription in general has the power to promote an ideology of nationhood. This claim holds true above all of narratives of the past, which (especially when circulated with official blessing) can be an effective instrument for the dissemination of what McNeill has called mythistories. Such stories sometimes take on the form of myths of national origins. Since the claims that they make about the past are presented as true and are regarded as providential, such stories tend to call attention

[71] As is noted by Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, 'The Geographic List of *Solomon and Saturn II*', *ASE*, 20 (1991), 123–41 (at pp. 124–25).

[72] An inventory of the more important of those texts would include the relevant entries of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, including the poems that are embedded into the surrounding prose of the *Chronicle* as its annals for the years 937, 942, 973, and 975; the OE Orosius and the OE Bede, with their own examples of creativity in the representation of the past; the *Burghal Hidage*, a census of Anglo-Saxon settlements that was drawn up early in the tenth century to serve as an aid to taxation and military duties; a goodly number of lives of English saints, whether composed in prose or verse, including Ælfric's late tenth-century lives of the royal saints King Oswald and King Edmund; and *Beowulf* and the *The Battle of Finnsburh*, with their stories relating to great kings and heroes of the northern world, to the extent that those poems can be ascribed to the tenth century in the form that we now have them. This is only a partial list, of course.

[73] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd edn (London, 1991), emphasizes the link between nationalism and the development of the arts of writing in the vernacular.

to the rightness of events that have transpired. They thereby confirm the legitimacy and indeed, in the popular mind, the inevitability by which the present order of things has come into being. In any historical period, as the archaeologist Stephen Driscoll has remarked, the technical properties of writing have enabled power relations to be expanded beyond the confines of kinship.[74] The capacity of inscription to serve powerful material interests beyond the local level is abundantly evident in Anglo-Saxon England, with its explosion of literature in both Latin and the vernacular during the period when an English nation was being formed.

From this perspective, it does not much matter whether a writing like *Widsith* was confined to a clerical milieu or whether it circulated widely beyond the scriptorium. The main body of the poem is as devoid of overtly Christian allusions as one might expect of a work that is set in pagan times. At the same time, Widsith the singer ends his monologue with emphatic affirmation of the power of God to grant earthly kingdoms (133–34), while the narrator ends the poem as a whole with reflections on the inevitability of death, together with the durability of fame 'under heaven' for all those who act in an honourable way (141b–43). With these dual acts of closure, as Donald K. Fry has pointed out, the preceding catalogues of kings and kingdoms are anchored within the Christian frame of reference that is taken for granted throughout the verse of this period.[75]

The production of a nominally secular work like *Widsith* in writing, which was a virtual monopoly of the Church, reminds one that throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, the leading members of the clergy were aristocrats whose interests were those of the dominant class.[76] Even such a devoutly Christian writer as Ælfric (*c.* 945–*c.* 1015), who was a model of orthodox piety, was not immune to the appeal of English national interests within the greater context of his Christian universalism. Like his predecessor Bede (*c.* 673–735), who went out of his way to

[74] Stephen T. Driscoll, 'The Relationship between History and Archaeology: Artefacts, Documents and Power', in *Power and Politics in Early Medieval Britain and Ireland*, ed. by Driscoll and Margaret R. Nieke (Edinburgh, 1988), pp. 162–87 (at pp. 168–73).

[75] Donald K. Fry, 'Two Voices in *Widsith*', *Mediaevalia*, 6 (1982 for 1980), 37–56. One need not accept Fry's contention, however, that this introduction of Christian values undermines the 'gushy materialism' of the catalogues of kings (p. 50) while 'burlesquing' the character of Widsith himself (p. 37). The two voices in *Widsith* are in delicate counterpart.

[76] Patrick Wormald makes this point about the earlier Anglo-Saxon period in his respected study 'Bede, *Beowulf*, and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy', in *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Robert T. Farrell, BAR, 46 (Oxford, 1978), pp. 32–95.

honour the native saints of the Isle of Britain as part of his history of the contribution of the *gens Anglorum* to the progress of Christianity,[77] Ælfric pauses towards the end of his verse life of St Edmund, king and martyr, to take note that the church in East Anglia housing St Edmund's body is not unique in its sanctity, for the English race has been blessed with other holy men and women comparable to Edmund in stature:

> Nis Angelcynn bedæled Drihtnes halgena
> þonne on Englalanda licgaþ swilce halgan
> swylce þæs halga cyning is and Cuþberht se eadiga
> and sancte Æþeldryð on Elig and eac hire swustor,
> ansunde on lichaman geleafan to trymminge.
> Synd eac fela oðre on Angelcynne halgan
> þe fela wundra wyrcað swa swa hit wide is cuð
> þam Ælmihtigan to lofe þe hi on gelyfdon. (lines 259–66)[78]
>
> (The English are not deprived of the saints of the Lord, for in England lie buried such saints as this holy king, and the blessed Cuthbert, and St Æthelthryth in Ely, and also her sister, incorrupt in body for the confirmation of the faith. Among the English there are also many other saints who work many miracles, as is widely known, to the glory of the Almighty in whom they believed.)

Ælfric's partisanship for insular saints is understandable given his apparent confidence that enlightened Christian leadership would help secure peace, justice, and unity among all the English-speaking people of Britain, to the advancement of both their welfare and the glory of God.

Famously, as authors as diverse as the anonymous *Widsith* poet and Ælfric seem to have been aware, writing is a medium that encourages objectivity. Its every advance is therefore based on loss — the loss of personal presence, as the persons who are responsible for education in a society that is based on face-to-face encounters recede into an author's disembodied voice, to the extent that traces of the human voice remain perceptible in a written work at all. It is in part to compensate for this grievous and, indeed, excruciating loss, I would suggest, that Ælfric put most of his lives of the saints into the form of alliterative verse. Verse was the time-honoured means of reaching large numbers of listeners with stories that

[77] On the English partisanship that accompanies Bede's Christian vision, see Patrick Wormald, 'Bede, the *Bretwaldas* and the Origins of the *Gens Anglorum*', in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society*, ed. by Wormald (Oxford, 1983), pp. 99–129.

[78] *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, ed. by Walter W. Skeat, vol. II, EETS, OS, 114 (London, 1900), pp. 332–34. I have modified Skeat's editorial practices regarding punctuation, capitalization, line spacing, and hyphenation.

voiced the collective knowledge and wisdom of a people. Even more than his prose sermons, Ælfric's saints' lives ask to be read aloud. As narratives that exploit the formal conventions of verse while avoiding the arcane diction and complex syntax that tend to make Old English poetry such a challenge for its readers, these sermons in verse seem designed to have immediate aural appeal to a wide audience.

It is perhaps for the same reason that the tribes, rulers, and events that are featured in *Widsith* are not just set out in a list, as are the gnomic claims of the Cotton Maxims or the sequence of feast days and labours that figure in the *Menologium*. Rather, they are put into the mouth of a fictive singer, a colourful man of the road whose imagined presence in the halls of kings provides the audience with a source of verbal power and a personal link to the past. It is because he has seen and heard so much in person, we are told,[79] that he can communicate his wisdom so effectively: 'Forþon ic mæg singan and secgan spell' (It is for that reason that I can sing and tell tales, 54). In addition, his material fortunes as a wanderer have depended on his face-to-face relations with celebrities. Guthhere gave him a great treasure in reward for his song (65–67). Ælfwine gave him gifts from his own lavish hand, Widsith implies (70–74). Best of all was the magnificent gift that Eormanric gave him, together with a similar gift that Ealhhild presented (90–98). Through images that personify largesse, the poet gives substance to the idea of personal friendship as the model by which society is properly governed. Power does not reside in some abstract legalistic realm, we are assured. It finds expression in the give and take of treasures and words of praise, just as it resides more terribly in the exchange of sword-strokes or whistling spears, as we are reminded through the reference to ferocious warfare that figures so emphatically toward the end of the poem (119b–22; 127–28). *Widsith* thus gives fleshly form to the martial ideals of loyalty, personal devotion, and courage that were believed to be the foundation of social order. The poet puts a human face on the past: the weather-beaten face of Widsith (if we wish to imagine that wanderer thus), or the regal face of Offa, or the alternately cruel and beneficent face of Eormanric, or the helmeted visages of the fearful warriors Wudga and Hama.

It is not just the medium of writing, then, that promotes an ideology of nationhood. It is the use of writing to communicate fictions. Paradoxically, it is in

[79] Note the use of the pronoun *ic* in verses 10a, 17a, 50a, 52a, 54a, 57a, 65b, 70a, 88a, 93a, 94b, 100a, 101a, and 109a, as well as fifteen times in lines 59–86 in the formula *mid — ic wæs* 'with — I was', and seven times in lines 110–23 in the formula *sohte* [. . .] *ic* 'I sought out'. I cannot think of another Old English text where the first person singular personal pronoun recurs as insistently as here.

literary works like *Widsith* and *Beowulf*, both of them written out in monastic manuscripts, that we find concise expression of one of the main functions of the oral-traditional medium of song that both poems call to mind through their images of singers of tales. This function is to relate the present social order — an order that in the Anglo-Saxon context comprised such complex institutions as coinage and commerce, estate management, monastic life, and systems of taxation, road-building, civil defence, and legal justice — to an imagined past where all members of society were bound to their leaders, and their leaders to them, by elementary ties of kinship and affection.

Through works like these, the past is made useful as a resource for the present. The concept of time that is evident in *Widsith* is not in the least linear, as one might expect of writings that exploit the full potential of the medium of literacy. Rather, time is structural; the past is a box into which all things seem to have fallen. Famous rulers from Alexander the Great to Eormanric and Ælfwine share the same space, and they all seem to rub shoulders with the wandering bard Widsith. The effect of this collapsing of the walls of time and space is to create a single 'fair feld ful of folk' rather than to identify individuals according to distinct temporal or geographical categories, such as Germanic versus Mediterranean antiquity, or the ancient versus the medieval world (our categories, again).[80] By flattening past time into a single plane, the poet is able to configure tribes into a relationship that mirrors, in prehistory, the desired situation of his own day. The past is created in the image of the present, as is the general rule in premodern historical discourse. A seemingly neutral tale concerning Widsith and his wanderings thus serves as a means of shaping the past into a configuration that is attractive from the perspective of the people of the poet's own age and nationality: the people whom Bede called the *gens Anglorum*, whom those writers who wrote in English were calling *Angelþeod*, and whom today we call the Anglo-Saxons or, simply, the English. Although they appear here only as if by reflection, called to mind as mirror images of legendary tribes or rulers that prefigured them, the English people and kings gain stature on that very account.

The rhetorical form in which the poet plays with time is worth attention. Despite my initial allusion to shopping lists, *Widsith* could never be mistaken for the lists that people use as ordinary mnemonic aids. Unlike the prose entries of such other tenth-century documents as the *Burghal Hidage* or the *Anglo-Saxon*

[80] Michael Hunter, 'Germanic and Roman Antiquity and the Sense of the Past in Anglo-Saxon England', *ASE*, 3 (1974), 29–50, has made a similar point regarding Anglo-Saxon historical writings more generally.

Chronicle, it is composed in language that is utterly distinct from that of everyday use. From its very first words, it proclaims itself as a form of ritualized discourse. Through its pronounced rhythmic structure, its system of alliteration, its deployment of striking metaphors and other forms of poetic diction, its free use of both understatement and superlatives,[81] and its special syntax, which is sometimes involuted in the usual style of poetry and is sometimes almost relentlessly reiterative, *Widsith* is made rhetorically exciting in a manner that accentuates its role as a *giedd* 'song' — that is, a vehicle of wisdom, not just knowledge.

Notoriously, the Anglo-Saxons had no concept of lyric poetry in the modern sense. The word 'poetry' was not in their vocabulary, and their chief native equivalent to that word, *giedd*, meant something rather different.[82] The Old English word *giedd* (or *gied*, *gyd*, *gid*, and other variant spellings) denoted a quasi-ritualistic discursive practice encompassing both verse and prose, both song and speech, both oral communication and writing. Through its associations with inspired speech, a *giedd* was thought to connect ordinary awareness with special sources of wisdom (as in prophecy) and, potentially, with numinous modes of being (as in the magico-medical charms). When Hrothgar speaks a long cautionary *gid* or sententious speech to Beowulf (*Beowulf* 1723b), when the unnamed woman of *The Wife's Lament* delivers a *giedd* that is powerfully laden with personal grief and anger (1a), when the speaker of *The Seafarer* speaks a *soðgied* 'song of truth' (1b) that expresses hard Christian doctrine in quasi-allegorical terms, just as when Widsith, a man who is *gydda gleaw* 'knowledgeable in songs' (139a), delivers a formal address that incorporates a great deal of ancient lore, then the members of a speech community are invited to enlarge their personal

[81] Widsith, for example, has visited the greatest number of tribes on earth (*mæst*, 2a), he has sought out the finest group of companions (*þa selestan*, 110b), and no song was ever judged finer than his (*næfre* [. . .] *sellan*, 108). Hwala was for a while the best of kings (*selest*, 14b), but Alexander was the richest or most powerful (*ricost*, 15b) and prospered the most (*mæst*, 16b). Alewih was the bravest of the Angles and Danes (*modgast*, 36b), but Offa was the first or foremost of them (*ærest monna*, 38b) and carved out the biggest of kingdoms (*mæst*, 39b). Hrothwulf and Hrothgar ruled their kingdom in peace for the longest time (*lengest*, 45b). Ælfwine had the freest hand (*leohtest*, 72a) and the least niggardly heart (*unhneawest*, 73a). Ealhhild was the best of queens (*selast*, 101b).

[82] Anglo-Saxon terms for singer and song are reviewed by Jeff Opland, *Anglo-Saxon Oral Poetry: A Study of the Traditions* (New Haven, 1980), pp. 230–56. On the word *giedd*, see also Karl Reichl, 'Old English *giedd*, Middle English *yedding* as Genre Terms', in *Words, Texts and Manuscripts: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Culture Presented to Helmut Gneuss*, ed. by Michael Korhammer (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 349–70, and cf. *Homo Narrans*, pp. 16–30 passim.

consciousness and deepen their understanding of the world by absorbing words of more than ordinary power.

An Old English *giedd* was not just a set of linguistic signs given literary expression, then. It also embodied a set of relations between knowledge and social praxis. As poetry was the usual form that the *giedd* took (though not the only one), poetry formed part of a discourse, in Foucault's sense of that term as both a super-personal mode of communication and a guide to ethics and behaviour.[83] A discourse is the creation of many individuals acting towards related ends. Since few of the cultural presuppositions that underlie a discourse are a matter of conscious knowledge for the individuals who make up that speech community, but rather are taken for granted as a part of 'reality', a discourse gives expression to the guiding concepts and ideals of a people and thus, as a form of ideology, may serve as the basis of social action.

Historical narratives, from this perspective, make up a special kind of discourse that connects various elements in the thought of a people via a set of relations imputed to the past. To return to Ricoeur's important insight, narrative creates human time. It thereby also creates agency, design, providence, destiny, and all the other elements of a teleological universe. Narrative poetry, or poetry (like *Widsith*) that either is built on a narrative framework or contains a narrative core, is therefore one of the chief foundations of culture. It is a world-making venture. In the early English context, heroic narrative connected the present social order with a past order that was regarded as authoritative, and it did so in the high-status ritualized form of verse. Both *Widsith* and *Beowulf* exemplify the capacity of poetry to promote social reproduction, or the renewal and transformation of society, in a continuing process by which political institutions, social structures, systems of values, cultural practices, and a whole cognitive system are shaped and reshaped over time.[84] Poems like these show how political consciousness, in the widest sense, can be shaped through fictions set in the heroic past. Through its quasi-ritualistic character, the medium of verse lends the words of the poet-speaker 'Widsith' an aura of authenticity that could not otherwise be obtained.

Narrative, particularly that form of narrative discourse that we call history, is often naively regarded as an account of what has happened. It can be that. It can also be a means of choosing the elements of a world that are to be named into existence. The reasons that underlie whatever choices are involved in this cosmoplastic process are not often immediately apparent to the people who read stories

[83] Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*.

[84] Cf. Driscoll, 'Relationship between History and Archaeology', p. 167.

or listen to them, nor are those reasons necessarily part of a conscious design on the part of the people who tell them. Anonymous narrative works that are set in a remote period of the past are notoriously likely to seem opaque to the people of later times. That is one reason why a work like *Widsith* calls out for close scrutiny, however disjointed or difficult it may seem at a first reading, for in its own terms it makes fluent sense.

Conclusion: Widsith and the Discourse about Values

In a recent study of the construction of ethnic identity in the early Anglo-Saxon period, John Hines has remarked that 'there would appear to be considerable scope for literary-historical research [. . .] into the historical and geographical consciousness embedded in Old English poems such as *Beowulf* and *Widsith*'.[85] Elsewhere in this book I write about *Beowulf* from such a perspective. Here I have taken up Hines's challenge with regard to *Widsith* while attempting to suggest what can be accomplished more generally through analysis of early English literature from an anthropological perspective. Perhaps I should briefly recapitulate why I have thought this latter attempt worthwhile.

The key insight that anthropology has to offer, when compared with other disciplines, is that there are as many social logics as there are social groups. Related to that insight is an ethical commitment to the right of groups to exist and to be understood in their own terms. Anthropology thus assumes a responsibility on the part of scholars to approach a foreign people and its culture first of all according to that society's own frames of reference, as much as can be done, rather than through any supposedly transcultural systems, which may be little more than an extension of the world view of the observer. Since the past, as has been observed, is in effect a foreign country,[86] those who study it can expect to experience the same 'culture shock' that travellers experience when they step foot in a foreign land. This shock is useful to the extent that it is the prelude to understanding. When travellers in foreign countries fail to encounter culture shock, then they need to ask themselves if one reason for that lack of disturbance is that they have

[85] John Hines, 'The Becoming of the English: Identity, Material Culture and Language in Early Anglo-Saxon England', *ASSAH*, 7 (1994), 49–59 (p. 52). See further the essays included in *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. by Hines (Woodbridge, 1997).

[86] David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985).

carried their own mental world with them along with their other baggage from home. If so, then they have insulated themselves from the foreign culture in which they reside and will remain anaesthetized to its unusual features.

The meanings of a poem like *Widsith* are best discovered by working through the experience of shock at its otherness. Whether one is impressed more by its oddly formal phrasing (Widsith unlocked his word-hoard), its confidently stylized metre and syntax, its curious reduction of the sweet language of poetry to the quality of a list, its hodge-podge of old names, or what seems to be a staggering degree of pleonasm, the poem ought to strike one as the expression of an *ars poetica* that is radically unlike that of most modern verse, just as it practises an *ars historica* that is incomparable with modern standards of historiography. The meanings of such a work can only be ascertained by reference to the total cultural system in which it occurs.

One noteworthy feature of *Widsith* and *Beowulf*, together with such other Old English poems as *Deor*, *Waldere*, and *The Battle of Finnsburh*, is that these works invoke a world of primary orality in texts that were surely meant for reading. They thus replicate the functions of oral literature in writing. They create links to an ancestral past that was inaccessible to the Anglo-Saxons except through storytelling. It is in part through such links to the past, even if only imagined links to a factitious past of openhanded kings, large-gestured heroes, and all-knowing singers, that the people of early England were able to maintain a relatively stable society, one whose practical institutions were felt to be based on ancestral precedent and quasi-mythic authority. Representations of oral poetry in the medium of written texts served to reduce the alienation of hearer from speaker that is the necessary result of the medium of writing.[87] Poems like *Widsith* and *Beowulf* thus helped solve the problem of how states can exert power efficiently in the absence of 'master/man' relationships that link each member of a tribe to a personal chief. They activated the ethos of small group encounters in situations where the subjects of power are actually subsumed into much larger and more impersonal units.

Earlier in this chapter I referred to postmodern developments that encourage one to see Anglo-Saxon England or any other idea about the past as a cultural construction rather than a feature of the 'real world' in itself. If the idea of Anglo-

[87] Compare Ricoeur's use of the term 'distanciation' to refer to the way in which anything that is written is alienated from the author's control and enters a separate realm where its meaning must be reconstituted by a reader, who may be situated at some remove in space or time; see especially ch. 2 of *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, 1976), and for discussion, see *A Ricoeur Reader*, ed. by Valdés, p. 7.

Saxon England was first developed by the Anglo-Saxons themselves, then modern scholarship has confirmed and elaborated upon that idea in what is by now a tradition extending back four and a half centuries.[88] I return to this point because it is worth reiterating that no interpretation of a work of literature, least of all the reading of *Widsith* that I have offered here, can claim a timeless truth value. As the remote period associated with the names of Offa, Eormanric, Widsith, and Beowulf was to the early English, so the early English have seemed to us. Any nation or people defines itself and its own cosmopolitan tendencies by looking backward over its shoulder, sometimes nervously, towards a period of more rugged origins. The story that modern scholars have to tell about a work like *Widsith*, the society that created that poem, and the world that that poem depicts is therefore part of a continuing discourse that relates to human values. If we pose the question 'Why did the phenomenon of *Widsith* happen at all?' then I do not think we can arrive at a better answer to that question than this: that through bold fictions about the past, poems of this kind facilitated a discourse about values and about national and ethnic identity that could not have taken place so readily in any other medium. A poem like *Widsith* is the result of a mythopoeic impulse, in the sense that it expresses a desire shared by many members of a community for stories that ground their present identity in a period of prestigious origins. Such myths, reinforced through many retellings and embodied in the whole body of verbal and material culture that constitutes the basis of education, have the function of manipulating those truth-effects whereby a society is motivated to conduct its business with common effort and a minimum of self-doubt.

I suggest that the phenomenon of *Widsith* has continued to happen during the last two centuries for many of the same reasons as before, as part of a comparable desire for origins (to use Allen Frantzen's phrase) and as part of a similar creative ethnicity. When scholars talk about the meaning and importance of Anglo-Saxon England today, they are still engaged in a form of mythmaking. Through their arguments about matters that relate to their own deep past, they are both refining a myth and carrying on, in an age of state-formations of ever-increasing size and impersonality, a time-tested form of cultural critique.

[88] This point is developed at greater length in my essay 'Appropriations: A Concept of Culture', in *Anglo-Saxonism*, pp. 202–28.

Some New Interest in the Goths

On the Part of Malcolm Godden

In the preceding chapter I remark that 'the tribe that wins the poet's sweepstakes of praise is the Goths', adding that 'this fact should arouse no surprise, for it is this tribe, as Chambers remarks, that "had done or suffered so much that their heroes became household names" throughout the German-speaking areas of Europe' (p. 88). Moreover, as Malcolm Godden has recently pointed out in a study that has an important relation to my own,[1] the Goths were consistently represented in Old English prose literature as a major tribe of Continental Europe against whom the people of England measured themselves as regards both the chronology of history and the organizational structure of two vernacular books. The incident of the sack of Rome by the Goths in AD 410, in particular, loomed large in the historical imagination of the Anglo-Saxons from the age of Bede to the age of Ælfric, for Anglo-Saxon chroniclers, unlike their Continental counterparts, linked that event with the end of a former political order (that of Roman Britain) and the beginning of the current one (the ascendancy of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms). It is very likely for that reason that the Old English translation of Orosius's *Historiae adversum paganos* ends with the sack of Rome in 410, while the Old English translation of Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae* begins with that same event.

[1] M. R. Godden, 'The Anglo-Saxons and the Goths: Rewriting the Sack of Rome', *ASE*, 31 (2002), 47–68. Since I could not take account of Godden's article in the version of the present chapter that was published in 1999, I am grateful to be able to allude to it here. A sign of the obscurity in which *Widsith* remains is the fact that Godden makes no mention of that poem (nor, hence, of my arguments about it) in his 2002 study despite that poem's prominent allusions to the Goths, among them Alboin (OE Ælfwine), the conqueror of Rome. Of course, *Widsith* is a fiction incorporating legendary history, whereas what Godden addresses in his article is Anglo-Saxon historiography more centrally defined.

Indeed, the poet who expanded the brief prose preface to the Old English *Boethius* into a long, inventive verse passage draws very prominent attention to the Goths as conquerors of Rome.[2] The poet of the *Meters of Boethius*, whose sympathies lie more strongly with the Romans than with the barbarians, depicts the Goths in an ambiguous light as heroic but ruthless occupiers of Italy. Their king, Theodoric (OE *Ðeodric*), is depicted with comparable ambiguity as a convert to Christianity who, by accepting the Arian heresy, became hateful to those Christians who held firm in their orthodox faith, including the good Roman senator Boethius.

Whether or not King Alfred was the author of this verse passage (as he is generally believed to have been), he seems to have had personal reasons to be interested in traditions about the Goths. As Asser reports in chapter 2 of his *Life of King Alfred*, Alfred's maternal grandfather Oslac was a Goth by birth:

> Mater quoque eiusdem Osburh nominabatur [. . .] quae erat filia Oslac, famosi pincernae Æthelwulfi regis. Qui Oslac Gothus erat natione; ortus enim de Gothis et Iutis.[3]
>
> (Alfred's mother was named Osburh; [. . .] she was the daughter of Oslac, King Æthelwulf's famous butler. This Oslac was a Goth by race, for he was descended from Goths and Jutes.

More precisely, according to Asser, Oslac was descended from two brothers, the chieftains Stuf and Wihtgar, who participated in the conquest of Britain, eventually winning control over the Isle of Wight in alliance with the West Saxons.[4] Whether these brothers were thought to be Goths or Jutes or Saxons is uncertain; their exact ethnicity is left intriguingly unclear. Whatever truth underlies these genealogical and historical claims, Godden is surely right in his assessment of the significance of this part of Asser's biography: 'The story suggests that in the Alfredian circle at least Goths could be an honourable ancestry and their contribution to the creation of Anglo-Saxon England was thought to go beyond the sack of Rome and the destruction of the Roman empire.'[5]

[2] *The Paris Psalter and the Meters of Boethius*, ed. by George Philip Krapp, ASPR, 5 (New York, 1932), pp. 153–55.

[3] *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, ed. by William Henry Stevenson (Oxford, 1959 with supplement by Dorothy Whitelock; first published 1904), ch. 2 (p. 4); *EHD*, p. 289.

[4] Asser's assertion is based on entries in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the years 514 and 534. See the discussion by Janet L. Nelson, 'Reconstructing a Royal Family: Reflections on Alfred, from Asser, Ch. 2', in *People and Places in Northern Europe 500-1600*, ed. by Ian Wood and Niels Lund (Woodbridge, 1991), pp. 47–66 (esp. at pp. 48–51).

[5] Godden, 'The Anglo-Saxons and the Goths', p. 68. Richard North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 160–71, advances a complex argument relating to the

Godden's point is, if anything, understated. One could go farther and affirm that one effect of this part of Asser's history is to enhance the reputation of both Goths and Anglo-Saxons by weaving the Goths, who are now blended in with Bede's Jutes, into an emergent myth of English ethnogenesis. Another effect is to raise the stature of the West Saxon ruling family through a Gothic connection. If one wishes to identify a point of origin for the phenomenon of 'Gothicism' in England, chapter 2 of Asser's *Life of King Alfred* is a good place to start.

On the Part of Fred C. Robinson

In his fine contribution to the 2001 volume *A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature*, Fred C. Robinson arrives at the same conclusion that I advance in the 1999 article on which the present chapter is based.[6] Referring to the catalog of names of tribes and heroes that is the main substance of *Widsith*, Robinson writes:

> This list of ancient names is presented from a proto-Anglo-Saxon perspective. The *scop* Widsith is identified as a Myrging, and this nation appears to be a sub-group of the Saxons when they were still in their continental home.[7] The lady Ealhhild, whom he escorts to the court of the mighty Gothic king Eormanric, is from Ongel. That is, she is from the tribe of the Angles while they were still in Schleswig, before they migrated to England. The Christian Anglo-Saxon audience of *Widsith* is given a tour of the people and nations of ancient Germania by a man who is one of their forebears with connections to both Angles and Saxons.[8]

This is both well and succinctly said. The fact that the perspective on *Widsith* that I have advanced has also, in its general contours, seemed reasonable to Robinson on the basis of his independent reading of that poem ought to go some distance

ancestral king Geat, the Goths, *Deor*, and the royal line of Wessex, finding evidence for political allegory in *Deor*, which he suggests 'was written in *c.* 855–6' as a comment on contemporary events. Any close discussion of North's claims, which depend on many speculative turns, would take me far afield from my main topic, which is the Anglo-Saxons' use of the Goths to magnify themselves.

[6] Fred C. Robinson, 'Secular Poetry', in Pulsiano and Treharne, pp. 281–95 (at pp. 281–84).

[7] At this point Robinson inserts a reference to pp. 183–86 of Malone's edition of *Widsith* (2nd edn), which I too cite on this point (see p. 94 above, note 57). It is important to recognize, however, that Malone is far from accepting the general argument that Robinson and I advance; in fact, some of the particulars of Malone's discussion, if accepted, would preclude an interpretation along such lines.

[8] Robinson, 'Secular Poetry', p. 282.

to disarm possible criticism. In a gracious personal communication, Robinson confirms that he had 'no knowledge whatsoever, either direct or second-hand', of my essay when he wrote his own assessment of the poem and adds that, even though his own treatment of the poem is 'brief and in passing', 'we are in quite remarkable agreement on more than one aspect of *Widsith* [. . .]. Your thorough study confirms my own independent conclusions'.[9]

Although buoyed by those generous remarks, I am aware that the thesis that Robinson states with elegant simplicity, and that I have developed in more detail than some readers may prefer, is a provocative one that will not be accepted on all sides. In fact, it has already been viewed with detachment by R. D. Fulk and Christopher M. Cain in their 2003 *History of Old English Literature*:

> The hypothesis of Niles [1999b] that the poem represents a tenth-century 'act of mythopoesis whereby a desired order of things is projected onto a formative period of the past' (p. 193) is as daring as any proposed by Malone. It rests upon the conjecture that the Myrgings would have been perceived as a branch of the Saxon nation and Widsith himself therefore as a 'proto-Saxon'.[10]

Such reservations are understandable. Fulk and Cain are correct to point out that the 'Myrging/Saxon' connection to which Robinson and I call attention may not have been perceived as such by an audience of Anglo-Saxons. Those people are dead; we cannot know what they perceived. The *Widsith* poet is dead; we cannot know what he intended. All we can do is read the text carefully, letting it guide our thoughts along lines that are free from fixed preconceptions and that have the appeal of intellectual coherence.

On the Part of Walter Goffart

In a recent issue of *Speculum*, the historian Walter Goffart, well known for his contributions to the historiography of late antiquity, has fired off a provocative broadside as the latest salvo in a long-running intellectual border war.[11] In it he

[9] Personal communication of 18 September 2004, quoted with the writer's permission.

[10] Fulk and Cain, p. 266, n. 45.

[11] Walter A. Goffart, 'Jordanes's *Getica* and the Disputed Authenticity of Gothic Origins from Scandinavia', *Speculum*, 80 (2005), 379–98. Goffart here returns to a theme raised in his book *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550–800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton, 1988). I wish to thank Andrew Merrills for helpful pointers relating to this debate and for allowing me to read, in advance of publication, the discriminating chapter

attacks an item of belief that has been reiterated so many times from the Middle Ages to the present day as to acquire the status of truth. This is the notion that at some early period of their history, the Goths emigrated to the Continent from Scandinavia, thence eventually arriving at their eventual homelands north of the Danube, on the north-eastern fringe of what became the Roman Empire.

As far as can be ascertained, the idea of the Goths' Scandinavian origins was first articulated with any coherence in Jordanes' mid-sixth-century *Gothic History*, or *Getica*. Emphasizing Jordanes' originality as a mythmaker (as opposed to his debt to Cassiodorus), Goffart argues that even though this claim has been accepted by a long line of authorities, there is no more reason to give credence to it than to equally creative claims that have been made concerning the Goths' Trojan, Scythian, or Noachic origins. If, in recent centuries, the myth of Scandinavian origins has eclipsed these rival ones, then that may be (Goffart implies) because over the years, such a myth has served to reinforce modern ethnic biases relating to the homeland of the Nordic peoples and the stature of the Nordic peoples (or one or another subgroup of those peoples) as founders of no few of the leading nations of Europe.

While it would be the height of folly for a literary scholar to thrust himself into the midst of this debate like a Christian conversing among lions, I find nothing unreasonable in Goffart's critique of the historiographical evidence for the Goths' Scandinavian origins. As he well shows, that evidence consists almost entirely of a few paragraphs from Jordanes — a man who was a creative compiler and shaper of history, and scarcely a writer who could be called either unbiased or infallible.[12]

One can perhaps be forgiven for wishing that some day, a qualified person will offer up, from among the ruins of Jordanes' myth (if it becomes generally recognized as such), a coherent account of the Goths' actual origins and early history. After all, the Goths did not spring up in the region of the Black Sea fully armed after having sprouted from the teeth of a primeval dragon. Archaeological evidence, though never unambiguous, connects the Goths to a Germanic cultural

on Jordanes (pp. 100–69) in his book *History and Geography in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2005). Merrills demonstrates that Jordanes was a speculative geographer whose creative account of the Goths (as Goffart has argued more polemically) is largely of his own invention rather than being repeated from Cassiodorus. In addition, Merrills argues that one of the reasons why Jordanes' account proved so influential is that it was so closely in alignment with the political climate of the Emperor Justinian's Constantinople.

[12] Michael Kulikowski, *Rome's Gothic Wars from the Third Century to Alaric* (Cambridge, 2007), finds Jordanes not just 'unreliable' but 'deeply misleading' as regards his story of Gothic migration (p. 43).

zone that, in the years subsequent to the fall of Rome, spanned northern Europe from Tomis to Sutton Hoo. One would give much for a coherent account of the Goths' pre-Roman and sub-Roman interconnections with their northern neighbours. Then again, there are many questions pertaining to the snows of yesteryear for which one would gladly have the answers.

More importantly (and more realistically, as well), one still awaits the publication of a book on 'The Mythic History of the Goths' that would trace the idea of that people in the imagination of the peoples of Europe from classical antiquity, through the earlier and later Middle Ages, to the period of the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, and perhaps to the present day. While Samuel Kliger's book *The Goths in England* represents an energetic step in that direction,[13] a comprehensive study of the phenomenon of Gothicism past and present, informed by the current wave of interest in ethnopoesis and national self-fashioning, would be a plum to add to any scholarly library. Current debates among specialist historians concerning Jordanes' debt to his sources may be of significance in directing the attention of scholars from a wide range of disciplines to a phenomenon that is of very long duration, the pseudo-history of the Goths. From this perspective, the intellectual interest of Jordanes' history may be inversely proportional to its truth value.

The import of Goffart's arguments for the present book is the perception that modern pseudo-history about the Goths replicates medieval pseudo-history about the Goths. The two phenomena are one. As the leading barbarian claimants to the grandeur that was Rome, the Goths stood tall in the eyes of the Anglo-Saxons and other peoples of early northern Europe. A Gothic genealogical connection (whatever that was thought to mean, exactly) became the thing to have, for it was bound to enhance both the stature of a royal family and a people's self-esteem. The same connection was valued for the same reasons during the period of the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries in Europe, when the pride of nations surged high and when no few royal families and peoples (including those of England) drew on many means to establish their distinguished Gothic heritage, whatever they thought that concept implied.

When the poem of *Beowulf* first began to percolate into Western literary consciousness after its initial publication in 1815, it naturally was drawn into the orbit of the Gothicism that was such a prominent feature of the thought-world of that era. Whether one thinks of literature (the Gothic novel), material culture (Gothic architecture), or politics (ancient 'Gothic liberties', including trial by jury

[13] Samuel Kliger, *The Goths in England: A Study in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Thought* (Cambridge, MA, 1952).

and legislation by a freely elected parliament), the Goths were all the go. Given the early medieval habit of thought of identifying the 'three great tribes' that conquered Britain as the Angles, the Saxons, and the Goths,[14] it was only natural for Grímur Thorkelin, the first modern editor of *Beowulf*, to identify the poet's Gēatas as Goths.[15] He was followed in that ethnic ascription by other scholars and critics too numerous to mention.[16] James Ingram, the editor of a deluxe edition of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* published in 1823 (eight years after the publication of Thorkelin's edition of *Beowulf*), articulated what was then the prevailing doctrine when, in his commentary on the annals of the English Conquest, he stated outright that 'The Goths, Jutes, and Getæ were the same people'.[17] Remarks of this kind naturally had the effect of enhancing the status of the Geatish hero of *Beowulf* through association with a cluster of real or legendary tribes of whom the Goths were the most prestigious. Only the determined efforts of philologists trained in proper German methods, working over the next hundred years, were able to shut down this house of phantoms and illusions. In the meantime, by the early twentieth century 'Beowulf the Goth' had become a familiar presence in any number of reputable publications (see Figure 3).

Two truths are important to keep in mind. First, to accept pseudo-history at its face value is to be made a dupe of the past. Goffart and a number of other

[14] See pp. 40–43 above for discussion of the names of Bede's 'three founding tribes' and the threefold evolution of the third name, in the course of medieval historiographical tradition, from 'Jutes' to 'Gēatas' to 'Goths'.

[15] Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin, *De Danorum Rebus Gestis Secul. III et IV: Poëma Danicum Dialecto Anglosaxonica* (Copenhagen, 1815).

[16] For evidence bearing on that assertion, see *Beowulf: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by T. A. Shippey and Andreas Haarder (London, 1998), with particular reference to entries 7 (Peter Erasmus Müller, 1815), 12 (William Taylor, 1816), 13 (Gustaf Wilhelm Gumælius, 1817), 14 (N. F. S. Grundtvig, 1817), 15 (Friedrich Ludwig Bouterwek, 1818), 38 (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1838), and 106 (John Earle, 1892). Those citations only scratch the surface of the scholarly literature relating to 'Beowulf the Goth'.

[17] James Ingram, *The Saxon Chronicle* (London, 1823), p. 14, n. 4. As is pointed out by Kliger, *Goths in England* (pp. 15–16), when Abraham Wheelock published Bede's *Historia* in 1643 in a bilingual edition with the OE translation of Bede facing the original Latin text, he reproduced the translator's equivalency whereby Geatas stood in for Jutes. Similarly, when William Somner published the first OE dictionary (1649), he directly contributed to the equation of these various tribal identities, for he defines 'Geatar' as 'Jutae, Getae, Gothes'. Yet earlier, William Lambarde in his *Perambulation of Kent* (1576) states that Bede's Jutes 'were of Gotland, and therefore called Gutes, or Gottes'. Other examples along similar lines could be cited.

Figure 3. 'Beowulf the Goth'. Frontispiece to *Beowulf: An Old English Epic*, trans. by Wentworth Huysche (London, 1907).

contemporary historians deserve warm thanks for their efforts to combat errors in that regard. Second, to dismiss pseudo-history as mere pseudo-history is to run the danger of effacing what may be the most important aspect of the past, that is, the way in which it has been assimilated into present consciousness during one or another era. 'Beowulf the Goth' is not just a charming fantasy. It is a fantasy that relates to why the phenomenon of *Beowulf* happened in the first place, why that poem seems to have had some appeal in England about the year AD 1000 (when it was copied down in the only copy that remains), and why it exerted a strong hold on the imagination of the peoples of England, Scandinavia, Germany, and elsewhere during the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century period when that poem was first being discovered (by Wanley), translated (piecemeal at first), edited (properly or not), and admired (by all who were involved in this great effort of scholarly recovery).

Chapter 3

Anglo-Saxon Heroic Geography: How (on Earth) Can It Be Mapped?

For reasons that are both many and obvious, it is impossible to produce a map representing how the people of Anglo-Saxon England conceived of the geography of the lands, eastward of Britain, from which they believed their ancestors to have come. In part this is because of the paucity of relevant sources, together with the difficulty of interpreting those texts or images in which their geographical knowledge found expression. Partly, too, our present-day difficulties stem from confusions or uncertainties on the part of the people of that period themselves regarding what the physical shape of their world was, who their ancestors were, and where those founding peoples had lived. The tendency for medieval authors to employ ethnonyms with little or no effort to link them to a particular territory is well known. Difficulties along such lines only serve to aggravate the basic problem that inheres in any historicist project involving mentalities; namely, how can one possibly enter into the heads of people who are now long departed from this earth, never having recorded in writing more than a tiny proportion of the mental conceptions they once had?

The 'Myth of Migration' has been well documented as one of the Anglo-Saxons' controlling ideas.[1] Clearly the people of that time and place thought of themselves as descended from ancestors who had crossed what we call the North Sea from the

[1] The continuing importance for the Anglo-Saxons of the idea of their ancestral migration is demonstrated by Nicholas Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England* (Notre Dame, 2001; first published, 1989). In addition, Howe explores various aspects of the spatial and geographical imagination of the Anglo-Saxons in his essay 'An Angle on this Earth: Sense of Place in Anglo-Saxon England', *BJRL*, 82 (2000), 3–27, with particular analysis of the Cotton Tiberius map (discussed in my note 6 below) at pp. 11–16.

region that we now know as Denmark and northern Germany. Without the benefits of modern cartography, however, how did the people of that time visualize the land masses that lay to their north-east? Leaving aside missionary efforts on the Continent and the occasional pilgrimage to Rome, the Anglo-Saxons were generally a settled people not known for their venturesome qualities. When they did set sail from home in search of profit or adventure, they had no modern navigational aids to guide them. They had no satellite photos. Their own maps, on those rare occasions when the more learned members of their society produced them, were so entrenched in earlier misapprehensions and fantasies (particularly as regards the topography of the northern and eastern parts of the Eurasian land mass) as to be hopelessly inaccurate from a modern cartographic perspective. How could the people of that era have had more than a sailor's pragmatic knowledge of the relation of coastline to coastline, of the relative distances (measured in units of time, such as 'a day's sail' or 'a week's journey') that were involved in getting from point to point? Knowledge of this kind might possibly have helped a person get from one place to another without mishap. It could scarcely generate a proper map.

We know that one man — the Norwegian sailor named Ohthere, or Óttarr, as he must have called himself — came to King Alfred's court and told the story of what he had observed with his own eyes while sailing up and down the coasts of Norway and Denmark.[2] Anyone who tries to draw a map of those regions today solely on the basis of that person's report, however, will come up with something very curious. Only when Ohthere's account is mapped onto a faithful replica of Scandinavian geography as we know it today do the elements of his report start to cohere as parts of a plausible whole. And yet we must not forget how illegitimate it is to superimpose our current knowledge of the physical contours of Scandinavia on the thoughtworld of people dwelling at the court of King Alfred, in an inland region situated far from the icy fjords of Tellemark and the eddying channels that separate the North Sea from the Baltic.

Paradoxically, for that very reason it may be preferable, if one wishes to map the northern toponyms and ethnonyms that figure in Old English texts onto some representation of physical space, to map them onto an exquisitely precise modern replica of the coastlines of northern Europe. The anachronism involved in a project of this kind is thus blazoned forth for all to see. The only viable alternative, it seems to me, is to map those same names onto a chiefly undifferentiated blob; and though maps of that kind were drawn in the Middle Ages, it is hard to see what reason there could be for producing one today.

[2] The OE Orosius, pp. 13–16; *Two Voyagers at the Court of King Alfred*, ed. by Niels Lund and trans. by Christine E. Fell (York, 1984), pp. 18–22.

Of course, projecting period-specific Anglo-Saxon names onto a map of any kind is an exercise in guesswork and frustration: *wat se þe cunnaþ* 'he knows who has tried', as the Wanderer remarks in another context.[3] Geographical knowledge evolves over time, and yet a map can only freeze one frame of this process. The Goths who play such a prominent role in *Widsith* were an ancient and honourable people, we are told, but also a group of vagabonds and opportunists who never stayed put for long. When the fictive poet Widsith sets forth to visit their court, he departs *eastan of Ongle* 'from the east, from Ongel',[4] but is that shred of information sufficient to map the Goths anywhere in physical space? And does it help us a great deal in that task if the *Widsith* poet says that the Goths fought a major battle against the Huns at or near by 'Wistlawudu' (121a) — an evident allusion to the River Vistula — when the Vistula, as presently named, flows some 667 miles in its course from the Carpathians to the Baltic Sea? The unique Anglo-Saxon *mappa mundi* that is drawn on fol. 56^{v} of London, British Library, Cotton MSS, Tiberius B V includes the label *Daria* [for *Dacia*] *ubi et Gothia* on a portion of the northern European landmass adjoining what we now call the Baltic Sea. The Goths (and, to our mind somewhat oddly, the Dacians)[5] are thereby situated east of Jutland and *Sleswic* (Schleswig, the equivalent of Hedeby) and east of the *Sclavi* 'the Slavs', not far south of what is perhaps supposed to be the mainland of Scandinavia (curiously, here, labelled *Island*).[6] If the maker of this map had not

[3] *The Wanderer* 29b, in Krapp and Dobbie, p. 134.

[4] *Widsith* 8a, in Krapp and Dobbie, p. 149.

[5] Note, however, the reference in bk 1, ch. 1 of the OE Orosius (p. 13, lines 8–10) to the land of the Greeks, the land of the Moravians, and the region of the Vistula (*Wisle lond*), to the east of which are *Datia, þa þe iu wæron Gotan* 'the Dacians, who used to be called Goths'.

[6] For discussion, see P. McGurk, 'The Mappa Mundi', in *An Eleventh-Century Anglo-Saxon Illustrated Miscellany*, Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile, 21 (Copenhagen, 1983), pp. 79–87 (at p. 81, col. 1). The map (often referred to as 'the Tiberius map' or 'the Cotton map') is reproduced there at p. 174. While some of its features are clearly Orosian, others are independent of the textual transmission of Orosius's history. The location of the Goths and the Dacians so far north is an independent feature, as is the physical representation of the region of Scandinavia. Since the peninsula that strikes the eyes as an attempt to represent Jutland is labelled 'Neronorroen', a name suggestive of Norway, while the putative island that seems to correspond to the main part of Scandinavia is labelled 'Island' and yet is inhabited by 'Scridefinnas' (that is, Laplanders), there is room for several opinions as to how to interpret individual features. Interestingly, the labels used in its Scandinavian portions seem only erratically connected to the land masses as they are shown visually — and yet this visual representation is not wholly unfaithful to the actual lay of the land. Furthermore, very few labels are used for the whole of the European land mass that closely adjoins Britain — that part of Europe that, for an English map-maker, would

found a place for *Gothia* here, somewhat closer to civilized Britain than are the *Bulgarii* and the people of *Scithia* as one moves towards the exotic east, we would have very little authority for putting this venerable people anywhere at all, even if as a desperate measure we were to refer to their name only between inverted quotation marks as an acknowledgment that from the start, 'the Goths' have never been much more than a label for a tangled ball of political desires and aspirations.[7]

As for the Gautar of southern Sweden, whom some would see as the equivalents of the Gēatas of *Beowulf*, it is thought that they were absorbed at some point by their more powerful neighbours the Swedes, but no one knows when and how this act of assimilation took place. Moreover, the equation of the Gautar and the Gēatas is a modern philological conception, not an idea native to the Anglo-Saxons (as far as one can tell). Should the Gautar then appear at all on a map purporting to represent Anglo-Saxon heroic geography? My sense of the matter is that they should not, since they go unmentioned in English sources. The Huns who are mentioned three times in passing in *Widsith* (18a, 57a, 122b) were meteoric characters who disappeared from the northern European landscape within three generations of their arrival, leaving behind them an enduring cycle of legends but very few physical remains. There seems no point in mapping them, either, though the maker of the Tiberius map is so audacious as to find a spot for *Hunorum gens* 'the tribe of the Huns' south of *Gothia* in the direction of Thrace and Constantinople.[8] And so it goes with other tribes. The Jutes were absorbed into the Danes (but when?), the Danish kingdom shifted its boundaries to the west (but when?), and so forth, with each tribe seeming to take on a measure of solidity for a moment but then defying efforts to pin it down.

If nothing in this ancient world held firm for long, that generalization holds especially true of onomastics. Many of the names with which the Roman historian Tacitus (*c.* AD 55–117) designated the various tribes whom he enumerates in the

seem to be most amenable to nomenclature. The map thus seems to present a unique blend of learned tradition (in its textual aspects) and experiential knowledge (in terms of the physical contours of Britain, Ireland, and some parts of the region of the North Sea and Baltic Sea).

[7] Anyone interested in this map is advised not to put confidence in the diagram of its contents that is included in David Hill, *An Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto, 1981), p. 3, facing a poor reproduction of the map itself. In Hill's diagram, *Daria ubi et Gothia* is mistranscribed as 'Deira ubi et Gothea', *Sleswic* as 'Sleone', *Sclavi* as 'Sclaeu', and *Neronorroen* as 'Neroner Reori', while the *Scridefinnas* do not appear at all.

[8] The map-maker's ascription of a homeland to the Huns may have some relation to Bede's identification, in bk 5, ch. 9 of his *Historia ecclesiastica*, of the Huns as one of the peoples of Germania from whom the English traced their ancestry (Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 466–67).

course of his *Germania* are unattested in later sources. Conversely, when King Alfred and his circle of scholars set out to systematize their knowledge of the various regions and peoples of the world while translating Orosius's *Historiae adversum paganos* into their own tongue, the names that they employed to designate the various peoples of northern Europe do not always have a precedent in the writings of either Tacitus or other ancient historians. Moreover, English names tend to differ from their Scandinavian counterparts. Was that *Ohthere* who had so much to say to King Alfred about his travels in Scandinavia, or *Óttarr*? And was it *Gotland*, or *Gautland*, or *Jutland* of which he spoke? No one from that era can now be called forth to answer that question; and yet if one wishes to draw up a map illustrating the concept of heroic geography that is embodied in Anglo-Saxon literature, labels have to be used and choices have to be made.

The sense in which I use the term 'heroic geography' deserves clarification. In brief, what I wish to designate by that term are geographical ideas that, whatever their basis, are subsumed into a mode of seeing that has a validity independent of the actual features of the physical world. Heroic geography tends to be radically ethnocentric, in that it affirms the greatness of one's own people relative to other peoples who are not so fortunate, wealthy, brave, handsome, or important. Such modes of perception are not at all uncommon. They often come into prominence during periods of active *ethnopoesis*, by which I mean 'the manufacture of tribal or ethnic identity'. This term is usefully distinguished from 'ethnogenesis', which tends to imply real origins as opposed to manufactured ones. A process of ethnopoesis often thrives when efforts are afoot to bring groups of people of various backgrounds and traditions into a larger political unit, often at the expense of other groups of people living across the next river valley or beyond the next arm of the sea.

Ethnopoesis is routinely grounded in a people's concept of their past — in particular, of their originary past.[9] To a large extent, heroic geography is a counterpart to heroic history. It may include much fantasy, much idealizing, some posturing, and much shaping. 'Here the heroes lived and died, and these were their glorious exploits', the travel writer or historian relates, and boundary markers or cairns are pointed out as if to confirm the validity of such a claim.

Moreover, the capacity to stretch reality to its limits that is a characteristic feature of heroic geography may be augmented by a researcher's wishful thinking. One wants to see coherence; one desires hard information; one fails to find it. So what

[9] For a provocative discussion of this phenomenon from the perspective of an American literary Anglo-Saxonist, see Allen J. Frantzen, *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition* (New Brunswick, 1990).

does one do? One resorts to fantasy, idealizing, posturing, and shaping. 'Where were the Heathobeards located, or where did intelligent people of the later Anglo-Saxon period think that they were located?' The Anglo-Saxons don't say; they are as silent as the tomb. 'Ingeld's Heathobeards had to live somewhere not far from Heorot, and we know of some impressive Iron Age grave-sites overlooking the river Elbe, not far south of Zealand. So let's set them down on the map *here*.' That kind of guesswork is best avoided, for it is based on a futile attempt to recover true history as opposed to identifying a people's mode of perception.[10]

As I have suggested, ethnonyms are notoriously slippery to fix in place on a map, for tribes migrate, are absorbed into other tribes, take on new names, or are known by multiple names. The ethnic lore of the Anglo-Saxons did not necessarily represent an ordered body of knowledge, especially when vernacular sources are compared with Latin ones. Can one say with confidence how the people of later Anglo-Saxon England conceived of the 'three very powerful Germanic tribes' from whom they traced their origin — Bede's troublesome Jutes, in particular? In brief, no. One cannot. Since that is not a satisfying reply, however, I shall do my best to address this question in greater detail, taking it as representative of the larger problem of ascertaining Anglo-Saxon heroic geography.

The Problem of the Jutes

The people of later Anglo-Saxon England seem to have distinguished as three separate peoples the Jutes (Bede's *Iuti* or *Iutae*; West Saxon *Iotas/Iotan* or *Iutas/Iutan*), the Goths (OE *Goti*), and the Gēatas (a West Saxon name that corresponds

[10] Klaeber's map 'The Geography of Beowulf' (p. viii of his respected 1950 edition of the poem) perhaps deserves mention at this point, seeing how influential it has been. That map seems to me unsatisfactory in the following three regards: (1) the prominence it gives to the Eotan, who are no more than a ghost people in that poem if that name pertains to the Frisians rather than the Jutes (as I shall argue it does); (2) the placement of the Sweon too far to the west, away from their centre of power at or near Gammla Uppsala; and (3) the placing of the Geatas in the southern part of Sweden, close by Skånig, in a region that during this early period was largely under Danish control, as was most of the west coast of what is now Sweden. The map included at the end of the present chapter owes much to Klaeber's. In my own representation of that region, however, I have wanted to suggest that *Beowulf* is only one element in a wider world of Old English vernacular learning. For a categorical critique of Klaeber's map and all other maps of its kind, see Jos Bazelmans, *By Weapons Made Worthy: Lords, Retainers the their Relationship in Beowulf* (Amsterdam, 1999), p. 125, and, more generally, pp. 125–48, where Bazelmans approaches the poem's 'geography' as a schema of social order.

phonologically to ON *Gautar*). Since the Jutes are thought to have disappeared as a separate people by about the end of the ninth century AD if not before, Bede's *Iuti* had apparently become non-players on the European stage by the time that someone in King Alfred's inner circle set out to translate Bede's history into the English of his day. Alfred and his court would have gained no lustre from association with Jutes. Things were different with the Goths, the famed conquerors of Rome. By the late ninth century, thanks to their apparent prominence in oral tradition as well as to the circulation, among the clerical elite, of copies of Orosius's *Historiae adversum paganos* and Jordanes' *Getica*,[11] the Goths had become a major factor in the ethnic consciousness of many European peoples. Through various processes of assimilation, the Goths may have largely lost whatever separate identity they once enjoyed, but the Germanization of Europe was now taking on a Gothic turn. It is a sign of the times, as we have seen (at p. 112 above), that Asser attributes Gothic descent to King Alfred on his mother's side.

As for the Gēatas, the *Beowulf* poet makes them out to be a formidable tribe, rivals of the Swedes and Franks. The translator of the Old English Bede locates them in north Jutland and speaks of them as ancestors of the English (rendering Latin *Iuti* as 'Gēatas', despite the onomastic violence involved in that change). Whether or not the name 'Gēatas' linked that tribe to the Gautar of south-central Sweden, it certainly associated that people with the Goths. When a number of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Latin chroniclers write of the peninsula of Jutland as the chief place of origin of the English, they speak of 'Gothi' where the translator of the Old English Bede speaks of 'Gēatas' and Bede speaks of 'Iuti', thus showing what easy slippage there was between these ethnonyms.[12] The learned Icelandic historian and saga writer Snorri Sturluson adds his part to this

[11] Paul Bibire, '*Beowulf*', in *British Writers*, Supplement 6, ed. by Jay Parini (New York, 2001), pp. 29–44, points out that the names of the early Continental kings and heroes who figure in *Beowulf* 'correspond strikingly with the forms used specifically by Jordanes' in a manner that seems 'to go beyond coincidence' (pp. 35–36). He sees these correspondences as indicating the direct or indirect influence of Jordanes' *Getica* in Anglo-Saxon learned circles.

[12] Evidence supporting this assertion is readily available in Part II ('Texts and Translations') of Alexander M. Bruce's informative study *Scyld and Scef: Expanding the Analogues* (New York, 2002). See pp. 110–11 of that book for the mid-fourteenth century *Eulogium Historiarum sive Temporibus*; pp. 120–21 for the fourteenth-century chronicle of Matthew of Westminster; pp. 124–25 for the thirteenth-century *Chronica Majora* of Matthew Paris; and pp. 131–32 for the late fourteenth-century chronicle of Richard of Cirencester. All these chroniclers speak of 'Old Anglia' (from which the Angles are said to have migrated to Britain) as lying between the Saxons and the *Goths* (not the Jutes).

pseudo-geographical lore when he states that in former years, Jutland (*Jótland*) was called *Reiðgotaland*.[13] Snorri thus appears to want to locate the legendary homeland of the Goths (the *Hreðgotan* who are mentioned in *Widsith* 57b) on that Danish peninsula rather than anywhere farther east.

While most of the writings to which I have just referred are too late to be used as evidence for Anglo-Saxon geographical consciousness, they show how natural it was for learned medieval writers to associate Bede's 'third founding tribe' with the Goths. Largely for that reason, that same equation of Gēatas and Goths became a commonplace of modern *Beowulf* scholarship from the time of the publication of the first modern edition of that poem into the early years of the twentieth century, so that it once seemed the most natural thing in the world to refer to the hero of that poem as 'Beowulf the Goth'.[14] In more recent years, modern philology has done its best to disperse these phantoms of the imagination, though at the cost of negating the value of medieval pseudo-geography as an entry to the mentality of that era.[15]

Still, the objection might be made that, according to a general consensus of critics, the Jutes do play a significant part in *Beowulf* and so deserve prominent mention in any discussion of the Anglo-Saxons' conception of their homeland. A word that appears eight times in *Beowulf* in one inflection or another, *eotenas*, has been thought to refer in five of those instances to the Jutes, whom the poet seems either to equate with or associate with King Finn's people, the Frisians, in the inset 'Song of Finn and Hengest' (though there has been much confusion as to just what role the 'Jutes' play in that passage).[16] I should therefore reply to that

[13] Bruce, *Scyld and Scef*, pp. 144–45, quoting from what is ch. 11 of Snorri's *Prose Edda* in the standard 3-volume critical edition (Osnabrück, 1966) and ch. 8 in the translation by Arthur G. Brodeur (New York, 1916).

[14] This phenomenon is discussed at pp. 116–17 above.

[15] Anyone who reads Bede's history in its original Latin, of course, is still informed that the Jutes (Latin *Iuti* or *Iutae*) were one of the founding tribes of Anglo-Saxon England. So just as geographical consciousness did not stay firm from century to century, the geographical consciousness of a member of the Anglo-Saxon clergy, literate in Latin, may have differed from that of a layman whose primary or only language was English. This is among the many possible sources of frustration for a map-maker; and indeed, no one map can possibly convey the complexity of these relationships.

[16] There is no doubt among the critics that in its other three occurrences in *Beowulf*, the word *eotenas* (in its various inflections) refers to giants. Anyone who wishes to follow the following discussion is invited to consult Klaeber, p. 325 (s.v. the common noun *eoten*) and p. 434 (s.v. the proper noun *Eotan*). Alan Bliss provides a succinct overview of the 'Eotens' question in the

point, justifying on philological grounds the absence of Jutes from a map that purports to illustrate Anglo-Saxon heroic geography.

Five times in *Beowulf*, a word that is thought to refer to the Jutes appears either in the genitive plural form *eotena* or the dative plural *eotenum*. On the assumption that these five instances of the word pertain to the plural proper noun *Ēotan* (which in turn is taken to be a late Anglian spelling of *Iūtan*), Klaeber includes *Ēotan* in his glossary of proper names, defining it as '"Jutes", the people of Finn, the Frisian king'.

There are two problems with this conclusion. The first is philological. The genitive plural and dative plural forms of OE *Iūtan* 'Jutes' that one would expect to find, if the poet were speaking of that tribe, would be *iuta* and *iutum* (or perhaps late Anglian *eota* and *eotum*), respectively, but not *eotena* and *eotenum*.[17] The linguistic anomaly that is posed by the epenthetical vowel in those forms has sometimes been ignored or discounted, but it remains a significant obstacle to this interpretation.

The second problem that arises if one takes the forms *eotena* or *eotenum* to refer to the Jutes has to do with ethnic history. If we are to accept this identification, then the Jutes (or some subgroup of that tribe) will magically have been transported a substantial distance south-west of their homeland in Jutland. Granted that the tribes of this era were often on the go, this otherwise unattested migration has inspired rather desperate attempts to discern the history that un-

introduction to his edition of J. R. R. Tolkien, *Finn and Hengest: The Fragment and the Episode* (London, 1982), pp. 4–5; Tolkien's own discussion of that question in the textual commentary of that same book (as summarized by Bliss, pp. 5–6) is less persuasive and has not found general acceptance. The most recent and discriminating critical discussion of these issues is by Jacqueline Stuhmiller, 'On the Identity of the *Eotenas*', *NM*, 100 (1999), 7–14. In brief, Stuhmiller accepts that most instances of the noun *eoten* (and its compounds) or the adjective *eotenisc* refer literally to giants, including the instance (verse 902b) where we are told that Heremod fell into the hands of *eotenas*. As for the four instances that pertain to the 'Finn Episode' (lines 1071–1159), one is clear and three are ambiguous, in her estimation. The sword that Hengest uses to effect his revenge — a sword whose edges are said to be *mid eotenum cuðe* (1145) — is a sword 'well known among giants' (literally), not unlike the sword wielded by Beowulf against Grendel's mother. The three instances where the noun in question occurs in the genitive plural form *eotena*, however, she finds both grammatically and thematically 'unresolvable' (p. 10). This is not the end of her analysis of the thematic role of *eotenas* in *Beowulf* — in some ways it is no more than a prelude, in fact — but the rest of her argument need not concern us here.

[17] So as not to prejudice the issue of what constitutes a proper noun versus a common noun, I will sometimes suspend the use of capital letters (which are purely editorial) and of macrons to mark long vowels as such.

derlies their apparent movement south to Friesland, and from that region (it is claimed) across the North Sea to Britain. I very much doubt, however, that any such history of migration should responsibly be inferred from this literary evidence, based as it is on dubious philology. For there is another Old English word, well known to the *Beowulf* poet, that is far more likely to be the one that is meant in these instances. This is the common noun *eoten* or *eten*, denoting a giant of some kind. This word has the regular plural form *eotenas*, and its regular inflected forms in the genitive plural and dative plural case, respectively, are *eotena* and *eotenum*.[18] It is therefore my conclusion that in four of the five instances when the *Beowulf* poet has been thought to be referring to the Jutes, what in fact he is referring to are Frisians called by a pet name.[19] Why the poet calls them by this particular name, 'giants', remains something of a mystery, but the practice of using multiple names for a single tribe is a characteristic feature of the *Beowulf* poet's art. The Gēatas, for instance, are also called *Wederas* 'storm-warriors' and *Hreðlingas* 'sons of glory'; the Danes are also called *Scyldingas* 'sons of Scyld' and *Ingwine* 'friends of Ing'; the Franks are also *Hugas* 'men of Hugh [Capet]'; the Swedes are also *Scylfingas* (a name of no certain meaning); and so forth. As I am not the first person to suggest, the poet may have used *eotenas* four times as a synonym for the Frisians because the people of Frisia were thought to be of remarkably tall stature, as well as being admired and feared for their martial prowess.[20] So the Frisians are

[18] The statement in the *DOE*, s.v. *eoten*, that the words for 'Jute' and 'giant' are thus, in these plural inflections, 'indistinguishable', can be questioned. The nouns *Iūtan* and *eotan* are normally distinguishable in these inflections (*Iūta*, *Iūtum*; *eotena*, *eotenum*, respectively). Of course, Anglo-Saxon writers or readers could have confused them, much as modern scholars have done.

[19] Rather than following Stuhmiller, 'On the Identity of the *Eotenas*', in holding that the sword that is presented to Hengest at the time of his revenge — the one whose edges are *mid eotenum cuðe* — is known among literal giants because it has been wielded against them, I think it more likely that this sword is 'well known among the *eotenum*' (that is, among the Frisians) for the reason that Hengest had wielded it with deadly effect during the first battle at Finn's stronghold, the one where Finn's son was killed. Some grim irony would then be involved in the poet's reference to the sword as being 'well known'.

[20] My argument about the 'Eotenas' is much indebted to R. E. Kaske's learned discussion of this point in his article 'The *Eotenas* in *Beowulf*', in *Old English Poetry: Fifteen Essays*, ed. by Robert P. Creed (Providence, 1967), pp. 285–310. David Williams, *Cain and Beowulf: A Study in Secular Allegory* (Toronto, 1982), pp. 76–82, accepts Kaske's reading of *eotenas* as 'giants' but not, I think, for the right reasons. In keeping with his allegorical reading of the poem, he regards that word as always denoting 'Cain-descended giants' who are embodiments of the spirit of fratricide. This seems to me unfair to the Frisians, who may be involved in a feud (in which they seem to be largely the victims) but who are scarcely fratricidal unless one counts the killing of in-

indeed *eotenas*, but they are called by that nickname because of their stature and, very likely, their warlike character rather than because of some imagined political alliance between Frisians and Jutes.

To round out this discussion, for the sake of completeness I should also address the fifth instance where the *Beowulf* poet uses the word *eotenas* in what has been thought to be the sense 'Jutes' (verse 902b), even though that instance is inessential to my argument. In brief, what is referred to in this passage, which concerns the ill fate of Heremod, seems quite literally to be giants — nasty *eotenas* that apparently did a good job on that King when he fell into their hands, deserving whatever punishment he received. Exactly who those giants were is not easy to say. The poet implies that they are denizens of hell (as, for that matter, Grendel too is said to be, e.g. at *Beowulf* 101b when he is first introduced). We are therefore invited to infer that Heremod, having died, is tormented in the next world. If this interpretation is correct, then the poet's allusion to the Christian concept of hell is an oblique one, as one would expect in a poem of this character, set in pagan Scandinavia. If one dislikes that solution, then in this passage as in the other four instances discussed above, *eotenas* can be taken to denote 'Frisians'. This reading may seem odd (why should Frisians torment Heremod?), but it is no more or less implausible than the reading 'Jutes' that is accepted by many scholars today (why should Jutes torment him?).

To return to my main point: if the line of reasoning set forth here is accepted, then there are no Jutes in Friesland. When Hrothgar's scop strikes up the harp before the warriors in Heorot, he tells how the famous leader Hnæf meets his death in a battle of 'Half-Danes' against Finn and his Frisian kinsmen and retainers. Neither Jutes nor giants (in the literal sense) are present in the fray, nor

laws in that category. Similarly, John F. Vickrey, 'On the *Eorð*-Compounds in the Old English Finn-Stories', *Studia Neophilologica*, 65 (1993), 19–27, accepts the philological arguments for *eotenas* being used consistently in the sense of 'giants' in *Beowulf*. He goes on to suggest that in an earlier version of the Finn story, the plot concerned an encounter of Danish warriors with literal giants rather than Frisians, and that this story was later historicized, though it contained relic elements including the poet's references to *eotenas* and to an 'earth-king' and 'earth-dwellers'. These words, Vickrey suggests, pertain to an earlier narrative stratum in which the Danes won honour by defeating beings of great size and subterranean habitat. While this argument may be found too speculative to win assent, it should not be dismissed. As for the suggestion that the people of the North Sea coast region (corresponding roughly to modern-day Holland) were of large stature and obtained a nickname from that fact, it is perhaps worth mentioning that the average stature of the people of Holland today (if I have not been misinformed) is greater than that of the average stature of people from any other country in the world.

do we need to speculate whether or not either Hnæf or Finn, or both of them, is involved in an alliance involving warriors from Jutland. Seeing that Hnæf and Hengest are Danes or 'Half-Danes', then one is free to think of them, if one wishes, as having come to Finnsburh from one or another part of Jutland; but there is no discrete party of Jutish warriors at Finn's court whose presence there needs to be accounted for.

Mapping the Unmappable Continental Homeland of the English

In the two preceding chapters on *Beowulf* and *Widsith* as well as in the foregoing part of the present chapter, I have addressed some very complex and difficult questions relating to the Anglo-Saxons' geographical imagination. None of those questions can be resolved in the form of a two-dimensional image. Still, in order that my views may be set out as clearly as possible, included at the end of this chapter is a map that, looking beyond *Beowulf* to other vernacular sources, is meant to serve as a rough guide to the 'heroic geography' that can be inferred from a small set of Old English texts written down during the period *c.* AD 890–1000.

The map is based on information drawn from four texts in particular: *Beowulf*, *Widsith*, the Old English Orosius, and the Old English Bede. The latter two of these sources are unpretentious accounts in prose, while the first two are composed in verse that vaunts its high-gloss status. Taken as a group, and supplemented by the Cotton Tiberius *mappa mundi* (for what that map is worth), these works reflect a geographical consciousness that has some coherence. One might loosely call this mind-set 'post-Alfredian' as a gesture of respect to the King who seems to have personally commissioned the two prose works, who sponsored the general revival of learning that characterized this period, and who is said to have enjoyed Saxon verse and seems even to have written some of it himself, albeit of a far different character from *Beowulf* or *Widsith*.[21] At any rate, the term 'post-Alfredian' gets us cleanly away from the age of Bede, the great age of Northumbrian learning. It likewise situates us well before the period when the two Danish conquerors Swein Forkbeard (r. 1013–14) and his son Cnut (r. 1016–35) established a new Anglo-Danish political order, thereby bringing about a small revolution in northern geographical consciousness. It is the geographical lore of the English during the period from the end of the ninth to the end of the tenth

[21] I accept the general opinion that Alfred was the author of the OE metrical psalms and the metres of Boethius.

century that is most relevant to the present discussion, for if we can reconstruct the way that the men and women of that period conceived of 'the lay of the land' of their Continental homeland (seen in relation to their own emergent sense of nationhood), then we will have gained a better basis for understanding the many texts they produced during this golden age of English letters.

Early in this chapter the claim was made that a map can have heuristic value. To illustrate this point, a glance at the map on p. 137 will reveal the existence of a 'Geatish/Gautish/Gothic belt' that extends all the way across Scandinavia and the Baltic Sea. If we follow that swathe from west to east, it begins on the northern part of the peninsula of Jutland (King Alfred's 'Gotland'). It continues east, past Västergötland and Östergötland, the two regions where the Gautar in their several branches once made their homes. It encompasses the island of Gotland, which onomastically at least is associated with the Goths. Eventually it arrives on the mainland of Eastern Europe round about the river Vistula, not far from which, at some unidentifiable place, the Goths and Huns are imagined to have fought a famous battle at 'Wistlawudu'.

The significance of the ethnic swathe to which I call attention is that it separates into two distinct conceptual groups the other tribes that figure on the map. Angles, Saxons, Frisians, Franks, and Danes are all situated to the south and west of that belt, where they are oriented more-or-less towards Britain. In the eyes of an inhabitant of Anglo-Saxon England living in the middle years of the tenth century, these would all have been good Christian peoples with the exception of the yet unconverted Danes of Denmark. The pagan Norwegians and the pagan Swedes (as well as the pagan Finns and the exquisitely pagan Huns, two peoples too remote or phantasmagoric to be placed on this map) are situated north, north-east, or east of that swathe. They are thus oriented towards the exotic and fabulous regions described in the book of bad dreams known as *The Wonders of the East*.

The conclusion to be drawn from the present analysis is that the Geatish/Gautish/Gothic peoples, taken as a group, seem to have been thought of as occupying a buffer zone between two sets of peoples distinctly unlike one another as regards their degree of civilization and their resemblance to the English. On one side of this divide, Offa the great king of the Angles was the best of kings (as is affirmed by the *Beowulf* poet, at 1955–60a) as well as the most courageous of heroes (as the *Widsith* poet asserts, at 35–44). Offa's people, with their English-sounding names (Eomer, Hemming, Garmund, at *Beowulf* 1960b–62), sound like men and women whom one would not mind having as neighbours. On the other side of this divide, the Swedes of *Beowulf* are depicted as a savage people prone to treachery and civil war, as the numerous references to their dynastic history in the

latter part of that poem attest. As for the Huns, their reputation during the Western Middle Ages, as generally in Western countries still today, is as a people who set the standard for violence and cruelty.

Where does that put the hero of *Beowulf*? In short, it puts him directly in the liminal zone that lies between the 'civilized' region located towards the south-west and the wilder one extending to the north and east. As a defender of a prominent stronghold of this civilized zone (Heorot) against hellish creatures who threaten to destroy it, Beowulf is held up for esteem. Normally a model of restraint, he becomes an embodiment of battle rage when his fury is aroused. But by that very token, he is not 'one of us'. He would not be everyone's first choice as a neighbour. Moreover, the transitional zone he inhabits is a mutable one. It can scarcely hold firm on the map, it is so wrapped up in the process of Geatish tribal dissolution. Any map of these lands thus has tragic overtones: heroic history and heroic geography go hand in hand, under melancholy skies.

The map included at the end of this chapter may be found of incidental interest for the way it dramatizes the strategic position of the peninsula of Jutland. In the chapter on *Widsith* I have directed attention to some significant details relating to the base of that peninsula, where King Offa is said to have established a firm boundary between the Angles and their southern neighbours at a place called Fifeldor (an otherwise unattested name that may perhaps have been meant to denote a point at or by the river Schei, where the market town of Hedeby once stood). Here I wish to consider that peninsula's northern end.

If the Old English name for northern Jutland was 'Gotland' (literally 'the land of Goths'), as in King Alfred's version of Orosius's history; if it was from that region that the Gēatas, a people readily associated with the Goths, set out in the days of Hengest and Horsa to subjugate parts of Britain; and if, moreover, the Goths were the most prestigious Germanic tribe of them all, then the lay of the land in Jutland starts to look interesting.

When Beowulf sets off from Denmark to his homeland (*Beowulf* 1903b–13), in which direction does he sail? Clearly he sails home to the land of the Gēatas, but where would informed people of the period of King Alfred and his successors have placed that locale?

According to the Old English Bede (as we have seen), the Gēatas occupied the northern part of Jutland. Beowulf therefore had a relatively short journey to make. Projecting his voyage onto our map, he would have cut north-west from Roskilde fjord right across the Kattegat and would have been at home in Jutland by nightfall, given favourable winds. This, of course, is not the answer to that question that almost any *Beowulf* scholar of recent years would give. All but a few

twentieth-century scholars are in agreement that the hero would have had to sail to the north-east, for that is where the western branch of the Gautar lived, in the region of Bohuslän. That is an opinion that I, too, would share if there were any evidence that the Anglo-Saxons equated the Gēatas with the Gautar, but no such evidence exists. It is not enough to state, in the absence of evidence emanating from this period, that the Gēatas of *Beowulf* 'are' the Gautar of history or to assume that anyone during the early medieval period would have made that equation, given their ignorance of the modern science of historical and comparative linguistics.

Similarly, from what land mass did the Hygelac of *Beowulf* depart when he set out on his ill-fated raid to the mouth of the Rhine? Again, anyone reading this poem or listening to it during the Anglo-Saxon period would have had no difficulty responding. Hygelac set sail from somewhere in Jutland. Given favourable weather and following customary routes, he could have reached the mouth of the Rhine in five or six days, hugging the North Sea coast as was then the usual nautical practice. What is the opinion of modern scholars about this same question? Modern scholars do not seem to have devoted a lot of thought to it, but if they did, they would have to say that Hygelac sailed a longer route, setting out from some point in Västergötland, since (in the opinion of most critics) the Gēatas of *Beowulf* are the Gautar.[22]

Several problems attend this latter interpretation. One is that in the extant records, Hygelac is never called a Gaut, though he is ascribed a number of other tribal identities.[23] A second problem, though of less significance, is that the Gautar were not known to be a seafaring people. For King Hygelac to have set out from Gautland to stage a raid in the region of the river Rhine would have been an anomaly, something outside the Anglo-Saxon field of thought. For him to have set out from north Jutland on such an expedition would have been a perfectly routine event, leaving its disastrous outcome aside.

[22] This assumption underlies the study by Francis P. Magoun, Jr, 'The Geography of Hygelác's Raid on the Lands of the West Frisians and the Hætt-ware, ca 530 A.D.', *ES*, 34 (1953), 160–63. With great geographical precision, Magoun traces the most likely routes for Hygelac to have taken in the immediate area of the Rhine Delta, but he does not discuss the expedition's point of origin, which he assumes to have been somewhere in Västergötland.

[23] To Gregory of Tours and the author of the anonymous *Gesta Francorum* he is a Dane; in the *Liber Monstrorum* he is one of the Getae; in *Beowulf* he is one of the Gēatas; to Snorri Sturluson he is a Swede. See Garmonsway and Simpson, pp. 112–15.

What then of the Swedish wars that play such a prominent role in the latter third of *Beowulf*? Do they not take place on Swedish and Gautish soil? The answer to that question is no: those wars take place on Swedish and *Geatish* soil. This is an important distinction, seeing that the Anglo-Saxons located the Gēatas in northern Jutland. So the wars that are referred to in *Beowulf* must be imagined to alternate between two regions, northern Jutland on the one hand and, much farther to the east, the region of Uppland, the famed seat of Swedish power. When Eanmund and Eadgils, the two exiled Swedish princes, are said to have set out *ofer sæ* 'over the sea' (*Beowulf* 2380a) to seek refuge among King Heardred's Gēatas, and when, after the killing of Heardred and Eanmund by the Swedish usurper King Onela, Eadgils is said to have led an expedition back *ofer sæ side* 'over the broad sea' (*Beowulf* 2394a) to take vengeance on Onela and claim the throne for himself, an Anglo-Saxon audience would naturally have concluded that these rival armies had to cross over a prominent body of water. The wording 'over the sea', twice repeated, carries the definite implication that the Gēatas and the Swedes occupy two separate land masses. And so they do, on the map offered here. In order to attack one another, these tribes must have crossed over the body of water that we call the Kattegat and that Ohthere refers to as a *swyðe mycel sæ* 'a very big body of water' extending *mænig hund mila up in on þæt land* 'many hundred miles into the land',[24] for either he did not have a name for that body of water or his English interlocutor or translator did not record it.

Modern scholars who equate the Gēatas with the Gautar naturally have some difficulty interpreting the poet's language here. The Gautar lived on lands contiguous with the lands of the Swedes in what is now the nation of Sweden. The *Beowulf* poet's reference to the traffic between these two tribes taking place *ofer sæ* has therefore been thought to allude to an inland body of water, perhaps more precisely Lake Vänern or Lake Vättern.[25] While that interpretation (although semantically strained) cannot be ruled out,[26] it finds no support in the Anglo-Saxon textual records, which show no awareness of those two lakes and their strategic importance. If one accepts that the Gēatas are Gēatas (as no one can

[24] The OE Orosius, p. 16, lines 9–10 and 12, respectively.

[25] Thus e.g. Chambers, *Intro.*, pp. 9, 342, 401–03.

[26] Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *sǣ*, include among their definitions of that word the sense 'of inland water, *a sea, lake*', citing two examples (sense V). In far more common use, however, is B-T sense II, a general one: '*sea* (as opposed to land)'. Also of possible relevance to the *Beowulf* poet's use of the word is B-T sense III: '*sea* (as opposed to water inland)', with one example cited (from Ælfric's *Colloquy*).

dispute) and also accepts that the Gēatas live in 'Gotland', alias north Jutland (as the Old English Bede and the Old English Orosius affirm, when read in conjunction with one another), then the apparent problem presented by the phrase *ofer sæ* disappears.

Some readers may conclude with a sinking heart that whether this was my original intention or not, I have revived the 'Jutes versus Gautar' controversy that, a hundred years ago, seemed to be the one thing worth caring about in *Beowulf* criticism and that, fifty years ago, no one cared about at all. But the last thing I wish to do is to reopen that debate in the terms in which it was once posed.[27] A hundred years ago, a burning question in the minds of many medievalists, particularly if they hailed from Sweden or Denmark, was 'Who were the Gēatas of *Beowulf*?'. Danish scholars tended to opt for Jutland and the Jutes, while Swedish scholars tended to favour Sweden and the Gautar. Both sides assumed that an answer to that question could be found *in history*, and it is chiefly for that reason that the modern Jutish/Gautish 'wars of the books' became almost as savage an exercise in international rivalries as the fictive wars of the Swedes and Gēatas in *Beowulf* are said to have been.

If the Geatish question can be rephrased in a different manner, however, it can provoke a fruitful response. 'Who did the Anglo-Saxons think were being talked about when the *Beowulf* poet and the *Widsith* poet spoke of the Gēatas?' Let us suppose for a moment that we were in a position to ask that question of an inhabitant of tenth-century England, someone who was more at home in the vernacular culture than in the world of Latin learning. The answer given by such a person might run along the following lines (here presented in a deliberately facetious manner):

> The Gēatas? Why, don't you know? Bede tells you all about it. The Gēatas came over here alongside Hengest and Horsa and helped to whip the Welsh. You know, they were the ones who sailed here from that dreary peninsula — what's its name? — the one that King Alfred's friend Ohthere was smart enough to give a miss to when he sailed south to Hedeby. Gotland, he called it. The dreary place up north, I mean, not the one with the hot clubs. Those Gēatas were all Goths, you know. My wife's people come off some of their folk.

[27] An argument designed to confirm the identification of the Geatas as the Gautar is mounted seriatim by Chambers, *Intro*., pp. 8–10, 333–45, 401–08, and 408–19, in response to publications by Pontus Fahlbeck (1884, 1924), Gudmund Schütte (1912, 1926), and Elis Wadstein (1925), among others. In his final contribution to this long-lasting debate, Chambers believed he had put the last nail in the coffin of the Jutish hypothesis by appeal to archaeological discoveries confirming the identity of persons commemorated by funeral mounds at Vendel in Uppland, Sweden. That claim is scarcely credible, however, given the historical uncertainties involved.

A person whose ethnogenetic thinking ran along lines like these would have been reporting what apparently was accepted knowledge in a tenth-century English vernacular milieu. His reply would have been neither wrong nor right, for what we are dealing with is not historical truth but rather a mode of seeing: a mythographic pattern of perception that once was felt to have validity, however absurd it may be thought today. Through excessive reliance on philology as a guide to the Anglo-Saxon mythographic imagination, modern scholarship has generated its own closed system of vision, its own period-specific perceptions of the past, and it has even begun to elaborate upon that system with some insubstantial pseudo-history about Gautish migrations to Jutland, heaped upon the modern theory of the migration of Jutes to Friesland that has long plagued scholarly understanding of the Finnsburh episode in *Beowulf*.[28]

The time has come to focus attention on a more productive question than 'Who were the Gēatas?'. That question, still waiting to be adequately explored, is 'How did the Anglo-Saxons conceive of their heroic past?'.

[28] I refer here chiefly to the argument of Kemp Malone, 'King Alfred's "Geats"', *MLR*, 20 (1925), 1–11, that, in order to account for the name 'Gotland', 'There must have been a migration of Geats from their historic seats to Jutland [. . .]. A Geatish migration of considerable proportions may well have taken place after the Swedish conquest of the Geatish homeland' (p. 3). Malone repeats that dubious claim, which is entirely based on onomastic inference rather than historical records or archaeology, in his subsequent article 'The Identity of the *Geatas*', *Acta Philologica Scandinavica*, 4 (1929), 84–90 (at p. 89).

Figure 4. Anglo-Saxon Heroic Geography.

> Ic wæs mid Hunum ond mid Hreðgotum,
> mid Sweom ond mid Geatum ond mid Suþdenum. (*Widsith* 57–58)

(I was with the Huns and the glorious Goths,[29] with the Swedes and the Gēatas and the South Danes.)

[29] Malone, in his edition of *Widsith* (Copenhagen, 1962), takes the name *Hreð-gotan* to refer to the 'nest' Goths who never left home. Since Malone's etymological interpretation of the simplex *hrēð* is far from secure, however, and since historians disagree as to whether there ever was a historical migration of Goths from Scandinavia (let alone when and how it took place, see pp. 114–15 above), I construe *Hreð-gotan* as 'glorious Goths', taking the initial simplex in its attested OE sense (cf. B-T, s.v. *hrēð* 'glory, fame, triumph, honour') even though that sense of the name may be the result of a folk etymology dating from Anglo-Saxon times.

Key to the Map

The foregoing map is meant to convey one scholar's impression of how the world of Beowulf might have been imagined through tenth-century English eyes. Emphasis is on the major peoples of the northern European 'homeland' as seen from an Anglo-Saxon perspective. The names of tribes are given in their usual Old English forms. Most place names are given in Old English, as well. The exact contours of the land masses, of course, are entirely the product of modern cartographic science.

Names of tribes	**Homeland *c.* AD 350–550**	**Legendary kings**
Dene (Danes)	Denemearc	Scyld, Hrothgar, Hrothulf; the *Widsith* poet's Alewih
Engle (Lat. Angli)	Ongel (Angeln)	Offa I, king of the Continental Angles
Este	the eastern Baltic	
Francan (Franks)	Franclond	Theodoric the Frank
Fresan, Frysan	Freslond (Friesland)	Finn
Gēatas	Jutland? Southern Sweden?	Hygelac; also perhaps Hengest, as well as the Geat/Gaut of the genealogies?
Goti (Goths)	somewhere near the Vistula?	Eormanric; Theodoric the Goth
Norðmen	Norðweg (Norway)	
Seaxe (Old Saxons)	Old Saxony	
Sweon (Swedes)	Sweoland, Swiorice (Sweden)	Ongentheow, Onela, Eadgils
Winedas (Wends)	the coastal plain south of the Baltic	

Place Names

('Ohthere' in the following list is shorthand for 'the OE text of the voyage of Ohthere'. The man himself — the Norwegian sailor Óttarr — would not have used these names in these exact forms.)

Burgenda land: Wulfstan's name for present-day Bornholm

Eowland: Wulfstan's name for present-day Öland

Gotland: (1) Ohthere's name for Jutland (or north Jutland); (2) Wulfstan's name for the island of Gotland

Halland: an extensive part of what is now the west coast of Sweden

Hedeby / æt Hæðum: the Danish name and Ohthere's name, respectively, for a market town located opposite present-day Schleswig, in northern Germany

Heorot: the name used by the authors of *Beowulf* and *Widsith* for the great hall of the Scylding (Danish *Skjöldung*) kings; medieval chroniclers agree in locating this hall at Lejre, near Roskilde, Zealand

Östergötland and Västergötland: regions of modern Sweden associated with the eastern and western branches of the Gautar, respectively

Sconeg: Ohthere's name for Skåne, the southernmost part of modern Sweden (cf. the *Beowulf* poet's *Scedenig*)

Sciringesheal: Ohthere's name for a market town located at the same place as medieval Kaupang, Norway

Sillende: Ohthere's name, apparently, for the island of Zealand, Denmark

Uppsala: Gamla Uppsala, principal seat of the Swedish kings

Bodies of Water

Ost Sæ: the Baltic Sea (extending west into the Kattegat)

West Sæ: the North Sea; the Atlantic Ocean

R. Rhine: where, near the river mouth, Hygelac met his death on an imprudent expedition against an alliance of Frisians and Franks

R. Vistula: river near the place (the *Widsith* poet's unmappable *Wistlawudu*) where the Goths are said to have fought a legendary battle against the Huns

Additional Notes

The reason why there are two Gotlands on the map is that the Norwegian voyager Ohthere used that name to refer to what is now northern Jutland, while the English (or Frisian?) voyager Wulfstan used it to refer to the island in the Baltic Sea that is called by that name today. Similarly, two Theodorics appear in the list of famous kings because there were two prominent kings of that name, the fourth-century king of the Goths and the sixth-century king of the Franks.

Modern names are used sparingly. Exceptions are Västergötland and Östergötland, two place names that help to locate the two main branches of the Gautar in adjoining parts of present-day Sweden. The label 'Gautar' does not appear on the map, however, because it has no place in the English textual records. In the Old English Bede, the Gēatas are located in northern Jutland, and so that is where they are placed on this map even if that location is fictitious.

Uncertainty would attend almost any attempt to place additional tribal names on the map. The Heathobeards who, led by Ingeld, are famed for having fought the Danes at the doors of Heorot may have been thought to occupy a territory south of Jutland, but they cannot well be pinpointed on a map. As for the 'Winedas' (or Winede, or Wends), this was apparently an umbrella term for a cluster of tribes living along the south shore of the Baltic Sea roughly between Schleswig and the River Vistula, though one cannot tell how far their territories

were thought to extend. Their collective name seems to encompass both Slavic-speaking and Germanic-speaking tribes, at least some of whom went by more particular names such as Wylfings and Vandals.

Ohthere's 'Sillende' is a name that has inspired controversy. Scholars have debated whether that name refers to the east coast of southern Jutland or to the island of Zealand (Danish 'Sjælland'). Nautical considerations, though far from conclusive, have been thought to favour the former identification. Onomastic considerations definitely favour the latter one, for the name *Sillende* resembles 'Sjælland' quite closely in that name's early attested forms (ON *Selund*; Latin *Selon*, *Selant*, *Sialand*) and does not resemble 'Jutland' at all.[30] Recent archaeological evidence tips the balance decisively away from Jutland. It is hard to imagine that in this part of his narrative, which enumerates important geographical reference points, Ohthere could have been speaking of any place other than the main seat of Danish power in his time, the island of Zealand with its 'central places' Lejre and Tissø.[31]

[30] Although Matthew Townend, *Language and History in Viking Age England*, Studies in the Early Middle Ages, 6 (Turnhout, 2002), p. 105, finds philological support for the identification with south-east Jutland, Bent Jørgensen, author of the *Dansk Stednavneleksikon*, 3 vols (Copenhagen, 1981–83), has put his considerable scholarly weight behind the identification with Zealand (in vol. I (1981), s.v. *Sjælland*, pp. 103–04). Information about the etymology and early forms of that place name are given there. When Sillende is mentioned somewhat earlier in ch. 1 of the OE Orosius (at p. 12, line 31), that name could be construed to mean either southern Jutland (as Bately concludes) or Zealand. It is possible that whatever Ohthere's native name for Zealand was, it came to be spelled 'Sillende' by someone influenced by this earlier passage.

[31] See the discussion in Lund, *Two Voyagers at the Court*, p. 67. The value of the note on *Sillende* in this commendable book is compromised by the statement that a recent argument in favour of the equation of Sillende and Zealand 'seems to imply a revival of old notions of a powerful dynasty at Lejre, long since abandoned by most scholars' (p. 67). On the contrary, as has been noted above (p. 47 n. 86), archaeological discoveries that post-date Lund's 1984 book have confirmed the existence of a great hall at Lejre that has been radiocarbon-dated to round about the year AD 880, very close indeed to the time when Ohthere's account of his voyages was being published at King Alfred's court (*c.* AD 890). This hall was the second one built at Lejre during the period *c.* AD 680–880; see Tom Christensen, 'Lejre Beyond Legend – The Archaeological Evidence', *Journal of Danish Archaeology*, 10 (1991), 163–85, and *Lejre – Syn og Sagn* (Roskilde, 1991). During 2004–05, a new round of excavations at Lejre revealed the remains of a hall of earlier (sixth-century) date. These discoveries are set forth, and their implications explored, in the forthcoming collaborative book *Beowulf and Lejre* (Tempe, 2006). As for Tissø, a settlement associated with the Danish military elite, its significance too has only recently been revealed; for a summary account, see Lars Jørgensen, 'Tissø', in *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, 2nd edn, ed. by Herbert Jankuhn and others (Berlin, 1968–), XXX (2005), 619–24.

Chapter 4

The Myth of the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet

Thirteen years ago Roberta Frank published an article, based on her Toller Lecture for 1992, titled 'The Search for the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet'.[1] With caustic wit as well as impeccable scholarship, she there points out the extent to which modern-day conceptions of Old English poets and poetry have been shaped by the passion for bardic verse that swept through Europe during the later decades of the eighteenth century. For a while, it seems, thanks to the influence of Thomas Percy and the vogue of James MacPherson's spurious Ossian, no ancient poetry was judged worthy of acclaim unless it could be ascribed to the wild, natural art of minstrels.[2]

Frank also points out that the search for the oral poet began well before the era of Percy and MacPherson. During the twelfth century, the writers of Latin chronicles seemed fascinated by the idea that there had been bards in Anglo-Saxon England. It is the Anglo-Norman historian William of Malmesbury (*c.* 1095–

The present chapter represents a reworking of an essay first published in a special issue of *Western Folklore*, ed. by Joseph Falaky Nagy, containing papers presented at a conference on 'Models of Performance in Oral Epic, Ballad, and Song'. I am grateful to Professor Nagy and the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at UCLA for having invited me to present my thoughts before distinguished experts in one or another genre or period of oral poetry from Homer to the present day. I am also grateful for constructive comments by members of the 'Draft Group' of the Department of English at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in the fall of 2003.

[1] Roberta Frank, 'The Search for the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet', *BJRL*, 75 (1993), 11–36.

[2] For brief accounts of these two literary figures and their influence, see Sigrid Rieuwerts, 'Percy, Thomas (1729–1811)', and Melanie K. Hutsell, 'MacPherson, James (1736–1796)', in the *Encyclopedia of Folklore and Literature*, ed. by Mary Ellen Brown and Bruce A. Rosenberg (Santa Barbara, 1998), pp. 495–97 and 401–02, respectively.

c. 1143), for example, whom we can thank for the story that Aldhelm, the late seventh-century cofounder of the monastery at Malmesbury and the first major figure of Anglo-Latin letters, used to accost church-goers at a bridge so as to entice them to listen to moral sermons. After first attracting their attention through English songs, he would then intersperse the words of Scripture, thus leading the people back to good sense and right reason (*ad sanitatem*). This tale is such a pleasing fancy that it has often been taken as historical despite the passage of over four centuries between the period when the supposed incident took place and the date when William wrote down the story in his *Gesta pontificum Anglorum* (1125), where it is first told.[3] To put this temporal distance into perspective, it would be as if someone today were to write down for the first time, in a manner as if to be believed, a story of how Shakespeare used to entice Londoners into the theater by playing the lute on the banks of the Thames.

William of Malmesbury is also the historian who is responsible for the information that King Alfred the Great (r. 871–99) once disguised himself as a professional entertainer (*sub spetie* [= *specie*] *mimi* [. . .] *ut ioculatoriae professor*) so as to slip into the camp of his Danish enemies and spy on them unobserved.[4] This Alfred who is a master of disguise and is so skilled in the arts of minstrelsy is the same man, William tells us, whose spirits were lifted shortly before this adventure when he and his mother, both of whom had taken refuge from marauding Danes in the island retreat of Athelney, had identical dreams. Each of them in turn, it seems, was visited by the spirit of St Cuthbert (d. 687), the hermit Bishop of Lindisfarne, who promised them that the Saxons would soon achieve a great victory, 'and of this I will give you a striking token', he tells both Alfred and his mother. The local fishermen will return later in the day with a great catch of fish, he predicts, 'and this will be all the more remarkable, inasmuch as the wintry river,

[3] *Willelmi Malmesbiriensis monachi de gestis pontificum Anglorum libri quinque*, ed. by N. E. S. A. Hamilton, Rolls Series, 52 (London, 1870), p. 336. To the examples of scholarly credence in this tale that are cited by Frank, 'The Search' (p. 32), can be added Jeff Opland, *Anglo-Saxon Oral Poetry: A Study of the Traditions* (New Haven, 1980), pp. 120–21.

[4] William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum: The History of the English Kings*, ed. by R. A. B. Mynors, completed by R. M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom, 2 vols (Oxford, 1998–99), I (1998), 182–85. Objections to some aspects of the historicity of this account, as well as to Thomas Percy for giving credence to that part of William's *Historia* in the first edition of his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), were voiced by Samuel Pegge, 'Observations on Dr. Percy's Account of Minstrels and the Saxons', *Archaeologia*, 2 (1785), 100–06.

covered these days with ice, offers no hope of anything of the kind'.[5] Like all literary dreams and prophecies, this promise was soon found to be veridical. The fishermen brought in a huge catch, and it was not long before Alfred's army crushed the Danes.[6] History was improving itself from the time when the more sober entries in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for those same years were composed, for those entries make no mention of these events. Alfred as disguised minstrel and Alfred and his mother as inspired synchronized dreamers are likely to strike modern readers as figures of approximately equal plausibility. When William of Malmesbury set out to retell *la matière d'Angleterre* in his accomplished Latin prose, he must have been aiming for a crowd-pleaser.

Bishop Aldhelm and King Alfred the Great are therefore two bards who can safely be deleted from the historical record. Both were indeed poets as well as skilled writers of prose in Latin or in the vernacular, but they were not therefore minstrels. The fantasies that have often been repeated concerning their bardic talents should do nothing to erode our confidence that both were well-educated literary craftsmen who worked closely with Latin sources.[7]

[5] William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum*, ed. by Mynors, I, 182–83.

[6] Here William of Malmesbury is adorning an incident that is first reported by the anonymous author of the mid-tenth-century *Historia de sancto Cuthberto* minus the figure of Alfred's mother. The appearance of St Cuthbert to King Alfred in a dream vision is one of the crucial events in the elevation of the holy man of Lindisfarne to the status of Anglo-Saxon England's 'national saint', a development that, for their own reasons, the Normans welcomed and sustained. Correspondingly, the story of that saint's nocturnal visit to King Alfred helped propel that King to cultic status. See Luisella Simpson, 'The King Alfred / St Cuthbert Episode in the *Historia de sancto Cuthberto*: Its Significance for Mid-Tenth-Century English History', in *St Cuthbert: His Cult and his Community to AD 1200*, ed. by Gerald Bonner and others (Woodbridge, 1989), pp. 397–411.

[7] The belief that King Alfred was untrained in Latin letters is surely part of the 'myth of Alfred' that has grown up over time, spurred on by some remarkable statements made by Alfred's biographer Asser. In ch. 22 of his *Life of King Alfred*, Asser declares that 'by the shameful negligence of his parents and tutors he [Alfred] remained ignorant of letters until his twelfth year, or even longer': Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources* (Harmondsworth, 1983), p. 75; *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, ed. by William Henry Stevenson (Oxford, 1959 with supplement by Dorothy Whitelock; first published 1904), p. 20; *EHD*, p. 291. In ch. 87 of his *Life*, moreover, Asser states that it was not until the year 887 that Alfred, who was then thirty-eight years of age, 'first began through divine inspiration to read [Latin] and to translate at the same time, all on one and the same day': Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 99; *Asser's Life*, ed. by Stevenson, p. 73; *EHD*, p. 289. While these claims may be based on a kernel of truth, full acceptance of either of them requires a long leap of

There is a third English bard to be deleted from the historical record, I suspect, and that is the Venerable Bede (*c.* 663–735). In a letter appended to some copies of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, a monk who calls himself Cuthbert (no relation to the saint) writes of the last days of Bede and tells how, on his death bed, the great man of Jarrow gave voice to a short moral poem in Old English.[8] This frequently reproduced text is now known as his 'Death Song', a title that represents a double triumph of faith, first that it was Bede's composition and second that Bede sang it rather than reciting it. For neither of these conclusions is there convincing evidence. Modern readers who know Bede as the author of the long list of Latin prose works that are reliably ascribed to his pen may well suspect that by the end of his long life, he was so accustomed to thinking and writing in Latin that he is as likely to have composed a wedding song in Yiddish as a death song in Old English. Bede was a Latinist's Latinist. As André Crépin has observed, none of the translations from Latin into English that Bede is reputed to have authored have come down to us. His accomplished syntax shows almost no interference from vernacular English, while a reader who searches for Anglicisms in Bede's vocabulary will come up almost empty-handed. The purity of Bede's Latin style comes as no surprise given the extent to which that author would have been steeped in the language of the Church from the time he entered the monastic life. As Crépin remarks with reference to the golden age of Northumbrian monasticism, 'Latin was all the more easily learnt as children entered the monastery quite young — Bede at seven [. . .] — and henceforward were submitted to a kind of Latin intoxication. They had to learn Latin by heart, read Latin, chant Latin, speak Latin, write Latin, think Latin, dream Latin'.[9] Still, a good death song is a good

faith, as has been argued in a stimulating though contentious recent contribution to Alfredian historiography by Alfred P. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 171–98, 217–48. The second claim, in particular, has almost as much of the aura of the miraculous about it as does Bede's story of Cædmon. If Alfred was responsible for translating into English not only the *Meters of Boethius* but also St Augustine's *Soliloquies*, then he deserves respect as one of the premier Latinists of his day, for that latter work especially was no routine school text. As a child, Alfred may in fact have been trained for a career in the Church, for the chance of his ever becoming king must have seemed negligible until the deaths of all four of his older brothers during the intense, unforeseen traumas of the Danish wars.

[8] *Three Northumbrian Poems*, ed. by A. H. Smith (London, 1933; corrected edn, 1968), pp. 42–43; Dobbie, pp. 107–08; Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 580–87.

[9] André Crépin, 'Bede and the Vernacular', in *Famulus Christi: Essays in Commemoration of the Thirteenth Centenary of the Birth of the Venerable Bede*, ed. by Gerald Bonner (London, 1976), pp. 170–92 (p. 171).

death song, even if there is reason to regard it as yet another instance of the ease with which hagiography insinuates its way into history.[10]

Early in her article, Frank acknowledges that there was a third age, in addition to the eighteenth century and the twelfth, that was 'responsible for forming the Saxon singer we know today'.[11] That age was Anglo-Saxon England itself. Her review of the evidence from that period, however, is meant to do little more than justify the claim that when it comes to the search for bardic predecessors, 'that most inseparable and clinging of couples, the unknown and the unknowable, dwell at the very heart of our imaginings, rendering them uninhabitable'.[12]

That closing statement is beautifully phrased but leads to a kind of scholarly nihilism. While the basis of Socratic wisdom is to accept what we do not know, not even Socrates would have regarded ignorance as the satisfactory end of an intellectual pursuit. There is therefore still reason, I believe, to pursue the search for that elusive master of disguise, the Anglo-Saxon oral poet. While doing so, we should keep in mind that all we are likely to arrive at are reasonable inferences, based partly on literary sources and partly on the practices of contemporary oral poets whose art has been witnessed and studied in some detail. In addition, as we shall see, evidence from the period before the Conquest that is obviously non-

[10] Smith finds the poem 'without doubt authentic' (*Three Northumbrian Poems*, p. 16). Dobbie, acknowledging the possibility of doubt, affirms with greater circumspection that until arguments to the contrary are properly assessed, 'It will not be amiss to regard the song as [Bede's] sole extant composition in English verse' (p. cvii). Neither Smith nor Dobbie questions the modern habit of referring to the poem as a 'song'. Colgrave and Mynors, careful not to call the composition a 'song', obverve yet more cautiously, 'Only a comparatively small group of the MSS of the *Letter* attribute the composition of the poem to Bede himself, and those the later ones. So the evidence for Bede's authorship is by no means strong' (pp. 580–81, n. 4). W. F. Bolton, 'Epistola Cuthberti De Obitu Bedae: A Caveat', *Medievalia et Humanistica*, n.s., 1 (1970), 127–39, calls attention to the possible inauthenticity of the whole letter to which this poem pertains. More recently, while acknowledging that Bede knew enough English to appreciate Cædmon's *Hymn*, George Hardin Brown, *Bede the Venerable* (Boston, 1987), concludes that 'there is no compelling evidence' that Bede composed the 'Death Song', for even if the authenticity of Cuthbert's letter is granted, that text only claims that 'Bede repeated the little poem as a favorite during his last days' (p. 77). This reasonable view of the 'Death Song' was first argued by Walther Bulst, 'Bedas Sterbelied', *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*, 75 (1938), 111–14. Understandably, there have been few attempts at criticism of the 'Death Song'; one exception is Howell D. Chickering, Jr, 'Some Contexts for Bede's *Death-Song*', *PMLA*, 91 (1976), 91–100. Chickering accepts that 'Bede composed it under the strain of dying' (p. 98, col. 2).

[11] Frank, 'The Search', p. 14.

[12] Frank, 'The Search', p. 35.

historical may sometimes lead to useful insights into the place that the idea of the oral poet had in the Anglo-Saxons' manner of thinking about the past, and hence about themselves and their cultural identity.[13] Although facts about the oral poets of the early Middle Ages are likely to remain highly elusive, it is a people's fictions that chiefly reveal the habits of their hearts, and if we ignore their fictions we risk misunderstanding the people themselves.

Composition in Performance and the Anglo-Saxons' Concept of the Singer

There are at least two reasons why the search for the Anglo-Saxon oral poet is worth reopening. To begin with, current thinking about oral poetry and poetics in the Anglo-Saxon period has been indelibly stamped by research that has been undertaken in the past several scholarly generations into the phenomenon of 'composition in performance'. Well known in this regard is the classic Parry/Lord thesis, fruitful in its evolution from the 1950s to the present day,[14] to the effect that those singers who compose their works anew while performing them before

[13] This is a topic that Frank has explored elsewhere in her study 'The *Beowulf* Poet's Sense of History', in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*, ed. by Larry D. Benson and Siegfried Wenzel (Kalamazoo, 1982), pp. 53–65 and 271–77.

[14] The theory of composition in performance is defined with precision by John Miles Foley, 'Oral-Formulaic Theory', in *Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, pp. 614–18. Scholarship in the Parry/Lord tradition is reviewed at some length in two books by Foley: *Oral-Formulaic Theory and Research: An Introduction and Annotated Bibliography* (New York, 1985), with full bibliographies covering all language areas including Old English up to shortly before the date of publication, and *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology* (Bloomington, 1988). Alain Renoir, *A Key to Old Poems: The Oral-Formulaic Apporoach to the Interpretation of West-Germanic Verse* (University Park, 1988), draws on oral theory to clarify many aspects of the style, form, and content of verse in the West Germanic tradition, with Old English poetry as his chief point of reference. Andy Orchard, 'Oral Tradition', in *Approaches to Reading Old English Texts*, ed. by Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 101–23, offers a useful overview of 'classic' oral theory and discusses its extension into new ground. A judicious review of how oral theory has figured in the different language areas of medieval European literary studies is offered by D. H. Green, 'Orality and Reading: The State of Research in Medieval Studies', *Speculum*, 65 (1990), 267–80. The two books that provide the entry point for most of the work that has been undertaken in oral literary theory during the past half century are Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA, 1960), repr. 2000 in an edition augmented by a CD-ROM and an introduction by Stephen Mitchell and Gregory Nagy; and Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse*, ed. by Adam Parry (Oxford, 1971).

an audience do so in a special 'language within the language' that is marked by highly stylized patterning. This patterning is manifest on the levels of diction, thematic repertory, and overall structure. When such works are recorded in writing (it is claimed), internal markers such as stylized formulaic diction and a stylized thematic repertory, when weighed together with other evidence indicative of a non-literate mode of thought, can sometimes help a modern reader infer whether or not that text is a reflex of an oral performance. Of course, there are reasons why Frank prefers to remain aloof from this line of scholarship, which indeed has developed in complex and sometimes contradictory directions. Not all scholars who find themselves grouped into an oral-formulaic 'school' (perhaps chafing at that confining concept) are in agreement about such matters as the definition of the formula and the exact nature of the theme. No one these days believes that there is any one touchstone for the oral style, especially since learned authors can easily mimic stylistic features that are an organic aspect of the art of oral composition. In addition, not all scholars who draw on the groundbreaking work of Parry and Lord are as preoccupied as those two scholars were in the vexed question of the oral vs. learned origin of particular texts.[15] One researcher (a contemporary folklorist, most likely) might wish to examine the group dynamics of oral performance without reference to texts at all; another (a classicist or medievalist, most likely) may prefer to focus attention on 'the oral in the written' — that is, on the residue of oral modes of thought and oral techniques of composition in texts that are of literary origin. Those are just two possibilities among many. In any event, there can be little doubt that at least some texts that come down to us from Anglo-Saxon England are oral-derived, even if they also show signs of literary or editorial shaping.[16] There is also good reason to think that any

[15] A. N. Doane, for example, offers an adroit overview of the topic of orality in the Old English period in 'Orality and Aurality', in *Medieval England*, pp. 562–64, without being particularly concerned with the question of origins.

[16] Fulk and Cain have recently restated this position: 'Old English poetic texts are oral-derived (i.e. strongly characterized by oral features, even when they are literate compositions), and thus they are to be understood and appreciated within the historical context of Germanic oral tradition' (p. 231). Of course, insofar as Old English poetic texts are literate and sometimes learned compositions, they are also to be understood and appreciated with reference to the tradition of Latin letters. It is the complex merging of these two traditions, Germanic and Latinate, that accounts for the unique character of Old English verse. As for Old English prose, it is possible that some legal documents (such as wills and other bequests), some homilies, and some other miscellaneous documents (such as the Norwegian merchant Ohthere's account of Scandinavian geography discussed at pp. 43–46 above) derive either from oral dictation or from some kind of

text can be located somewhere on the middle ground of a spectrum that extends between two imaginary absolutes, the purely oral and the purely learned, taking 'oral' and 'learned' to include not just a mode of composition but also such factors as performance, audience, style, and rhetoric. Frank's disinclination to engage with scholarship along these lines seems a conspicuous absence in an article titled as hers is, for it is chiefly in terms like these, as developed in manifold ways in different regions of the world, that the search for the oral poet has taken place during the past half century. Frank playfully remarks that 'although it might be fun to pile up quotations from current writers concerning the nature of the Anglo-Saxon oral poet, for the sake of time and long friendships' she will not do so.[17] And yet serious arguments need not be evaded on the grounds of amity.

A second reason to reopen the search for the Anglo-Saxon oral poet is that the figure of the scop (that is, the early Germanic court singer) loomed large in the imagination of the Anglo-Saxons themselves. *Beowulf* is the text that comes first to mind in this regard, with what Patrizia Lendinara has called its 'self-conscious use of the Germanic past'.[18] So well known as to need no discussion here are the scenes in that poem when a court poet entertains the people who are gathered together in the great hall Heorot, first with a song in celebration of God's creation of the universe (lines 89b–98) and later with a song telling the legendary tale of two fights to the death at Finnsburh (lines 1063–1160a).[19] Of special interest for its relation to oral poetic theory is the scene when a group of men are riding back from Grendel's mere and a person well versed in the arts of oral composition celebrates Beowulf's victory over Grendel, merging his praise of that hero into legends about Sigemund the dragon-slayer:[20]

transference of performance into script. With these materials we have moved far from poetry and farther still from the bardic.

[17] Frank, 'The Search', p. 14.

[18] Patrizia Lendinara, 'The Germanic Background', in Pulsiano and Treharne, pp. 121–34 (p. 131).

[19] The singing of the scop in Heorot is also mentioned without specifics at lines 496b–97a in a passage that calls attention to the general merriment that precedes Unferth's verbal challenge to the hero. Later on in the poem, when Beowulf reports on his adventures in Denmark to his king, Hygelac, he refers to the singing and harping in Heorot at some length, as if impressed by its quantity and quality (did they not have such talents in Geatland?). He adds that King Hrothgar himself told stories to help while away the time during the second day of entertainments in Denmark (2105–14).

[20] Jeff Opland, 'From Horseback to Monastic Cell: The Impact on English Literature of the Introduction of Writing', in *Old English Literature in Context*, ed. by John D. Niles (Cambridge,

Hwilum cyninges þegn,
guma gilphlæden, gidda gemyndig,
se ðe ealfela ealdgesegena
worn gemunde, word oþer fand
soðe gebunden; secg eft ongan
sið Beowulfes snyttrum styrian,
ond on sped wrecan spel gerade,
wordum wrixlan. (lines 867b–74a)

(At times the king's thegn, a man skilled in eulogy and with a good head for songs, a person who kept stored in his memory a huge number of ancient legends, found one word after another knit together in truth; skilfully he began to strike up an account of Beowulf 's exploit and recite an apt tale through to its conclusion, varying his words.)

The fact that this scene is said to transpire during the early morning hours after the hero's triumph in Heorot suggests that what the *Beowulf* poet was contemplating was a mode of poetic improvisation not unlike what Lord has described with reference to singers of epic tales from the Balkans.[21] Frank discounts such scenes on the grounds that Old English poets were not depicting a contemporary reality. They were evoking an imagined past. The anonymous author of *Beowulf*, like the authors of the Exeter Book poems known as *Deor* and *Widsith*, told only of 'the singing of poetry by far-off, fictive Germanic scops'.[22] Such fictions have no historical value, and so they are ruled out of court when what is looked for is credible evidence of how actual Anglo-Saxon poets composed their works.

Working from a different perspective and to a different end, what I wish to claim is that precisely because representations of the scop were important to the Anglo-Saxons, they have value to us today, if not for their factual content then for what they contribute to the history of mentalities.[23] These scenes could be

1980), pp. 30–43, provides an illuminating discussion of the scene referred to here, as does Robert P. Creed, 'The Singer Looks at his Sources', in *Studies in Old English Literature in Honor of Arthur G. Brodeur*, ed. by Stanley B. Greenfield (Eugene, 1963), pp. 44–52 (at pp. 50–52). The passage has often been discussed by others, among them John M. Hill in the course of his study 'The Social and Dramatic Functions of Oral Recitation and Composition in Beowulf', *Oral Tradition*, 17 (2002), 310–24 (at pp. 312–14). At line 873, I translate *on sped* (literally 'successfully') as 'through to its conclusion' on the premise that a successful performance is a complete one.

[21] Lord, *Singer of Tales*, pp. 13–123.

[22] Frank, 'The Search', p. 28.

[23] Readers may wish to compare my approach to the representation of the oral poet with Seth Lerer's approach to the representation of runic writing (and, by extension, the written text in general) in Old English and Anglo-Latin literary sources in his book *Literacy and Power in Anglo-*

considered part of the Anglo-Saxons' mental modelling of their ancestral past. Although none of the portraits of scops to be found in the Old English literary records can provide a social historian with reliable information about the early practice of poetry, they can tell us something about how the Anglo-Saxons conceived of their art of verse. And nothing is clearer than that they conceived of that verse as grounded in the art of ancient Germanic singers of tales. Anglo-Saxon authors make a special point of calling up images of bards: singers like the displaced court poet Deor, hungry for new patronage, or the wandering bard Widsith, puffed up on account of the gifts he has received at the hands of great royal patrons, or the court singers who entertain the Scylding royal family and their visitors during lulls in the action of *Beowulf*, thereby linking the 'present' action of that poem to legendary examples of heroism, generosity, avarice, magnanimity, and pride.

It is that attitude on the part of the Anglo-Saxons, an attitude that was compounded of truth, faith, and nostalgia, that I wish to address here. The Anglo-Saxon search for the oral poet can be viewed as one aspect of a cultural myth that was in the process of formation as the English-speaking peoples of Britain developed from a state of primary orality in their native tongue to a state of sophisticated orality-*cum*-literacy in both Latin and the vernacular.[24] As Nicholas Howe has pointed out,[25] the myth to which I refer was a large one. Centrally and crucially, it consisted of the claim that the Angles and Saxons (or, more generally, the people of England as a whole, if they were not of other identifiable stock) were peoples of common heritage who had left their ancestral homelands on the Continent so as to win for themselves new kingdoms out of the ruins of Roman Britain. Incidentally, the same myth traced the Anglo-Saxon art of poetry back to

Saxon Literature (Lincoln, 1991). Lerer too discusses how the bardic voice functions as a 'literary fiction', and he analyses how such fictions are 'framed by presentations of the written text, and function more as tropes than as unmediated versions of historical reality' (p. 4). My attempt to identify an Anglo-Saxon mythology of oral poetry complements his attempt to define an Anglo-Saxon mythology of writing.

[24] It is essential to keep in mind that this movement was from a state of primary orality to a state of mixed orality and literacy. Literacy never fully displaces orality, whether in the monastery, the great hall, or the cottage; rather, oral communication can continue strong, often in new modes, at the same time as it is supplemented by the written word. Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, 1983) and *Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past* (Baltimore, 1990), offers incisive discussions of this point.

[25] Nicholas Howe, *Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Haven, 1989).

its Germanic origins. The myth of migration (with its concomitant motif of the oral poet) thus defined Anglo-Saxon England as a nation with vital pre-Viking genealogical links to the Scandinavian parts of the North Sea culture zone, in addition to its intimate and long-standing connections with Rome, Ireland, and other parts of Europe that stood apart from the Germanic homeland.

Like most myths, this myth of Germanic origins did not spring up fully formed. Rather, it gathered strength over some few centuries through a process of accretion, assuming a powerful form by the early years of the reign of King Æthelstan (r. 924 or 925 to 939), who was a noted patron of books and who ruled over what can accurately, for the first time, be called the English nation. During the reign of that King's nephew, King Edgar the Peaceable (960–75), who was a yet more decisive sponsor of learning and Church discipline, the strict organization of the English nation along the lines of Christian orthodoxy took giant steps forward. I suggest that it was particularly during this general period, during and not long after the Benedictine monastic reform (whose years of chief initial activity are associated with the reign of King Edgar),[26] that anxiety was experienced in some circles regarding the loss of a former heritage. To judge from the effective date of the Old English poetic records that have come down to us,[27] it was during

[26] For a succinct review, see Lucia Kornexl, 'Benedictine Reform', in *Medieval England*, pp. 119–20; a somewhat more detailed overview from a literary perspective is offered by Joyce Hill, 'The Benedictine Reform and Beyond', in Pulsiano and Treharne, pp. 151–69. Valuable essays on many aspects of the Benedictine reform are included in *Tenth-Century Studies: Essays in Commemoration of the Millennium of the Council of Winchester and Regularis Concordia*, ed. by David Parsons (Chicester, 1975). A detailed account of its intellectual roots is provided by Mechthild Gretsch, *The Intellectual Foundations of the English Benedictine Reform* (Cambridge, 1999). The reaction against the reform, led by members of the lay aristocracy (and their clerical allies) who resented the loss of what they regarded as their ancestral prerogatives, has been traced by D. J. V. Fisher, 'The Anti-Monastic Reaction in the Reign of Edward the Martyr', *Cambridge Historical Journal*, 10 (1950–52), 247–70. Catherine Cubitt, 'The Tenth-Century Benedictine Reform', *Early Medieval Europe*, 6 (1997), 77–94, offers a review of recent scholarship. She points out that while the accepted view that 'the Reform represented a mutually advantageous alliance between the kings and monks remains correct', the reform 'can no longer be portrayed as a simple attack upon the power of the lay aristocracy', for some members of the lay aristocracy were patrons of reformed houses (p. 80).

[27] By the 'effective date' of an Old English poem I mean the date when its text was first written down in an extant manuscript, assuming that no clear evidence exists that it was composed at an earlier time. Since very little of the poetry to have come down to us from Anglo-Saxon times exists in more than a unique manuscript and most of it is of unknown authorship and provenance, this choice of an 'effective date' is one that I adopt, albeit with some reluctance (see

the later decades of the tenth century that the Anglo-Saxons' need for a *consolatio poesis* — for a soothing application of bardic balm — seems to have been felt rather acutely. In this turbulent period of reform and reaction and, evidently, of 'history wars' based on rival conceptions of the past, it seems to have became important to some persons to see that the Germanic heritage of oral poetry in the heroic mode was not forgotten.[28]

As Donald Wesling has remarked, thinking of our modern period alone and so not speaking with complete precision, 'the bardic is print culture's nostalgia for oral culture'.[29] Fair enough; but it is not the medium of print that first of all incites 'a longing for personal voice and the will to simulate the illusion of personal voice'.[30] What is chiefly responsible for that longing and that will is the widespread adoption of writing, together with the acceptance of the authority of writing, in a society that had been accustomed to conducting its weighty business through the power of the spoken word.[31] Nor, to return to Wesling's claim, is it

my remarks at p. 30, note 45 above). If a text is a scribal copy, then one can assume that its exemplar was composed at an earlier date, but there may be no way of telling how much earlier in months, years, or centuries. On this point, with regard to the vexed question of the date of *Beowulf*, see Roy Michael Liuzza, 'On the Dating of *Beowulf*', in *Beowulf: Basic Readings*, ed. by Peter S. Baker (New York, 1995), pp. 281–302 (at pp. 294–95). By the criterion of 'effective dating', most Old English poetry, including *Beowulf* and the poems of the Exeter Book, can be dated to AD 960–1000, plus or minus a few years.

[28] Here (as well as in many other regards) my thinking is in accord with that of Wilhelm G. Busse, '*Boceras*: Written and Oral Traditions in the Late Tenth Century', in *Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit im englischen Mittelalter*, ed. by Willi Erzgräber and Sabine Volk, ScriptOralia, 5 (Tübingen, 1987), pp. 27–37. Busse argues that the leaders of the tenth-century Benedictine reform made stronger claims to the authority of the written word than had previously been made. In his view, the Anglo-Saxon heroic and legendary poetry that was recorded during this period represented a reaction in defence of 'heroic history' on the part of members of the secular aristocracy with ties to the Church. 'Under the fictitious names of Widsith and Deor', Busse writes, 'poets offer themselves as connoisseurs of such tradition[;] they want to keep alive the social function of the *scop* as *historicus*, opposing the monastic claim to a better history' (p. 36).

[29] Donald Wesling, 'Difficulties of the Bardic: Literature and the Human Voice', *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (1981), 69–81 (p. 73).

[30] Wesling, 'Difficulties of the Bardic', p. 73.

[31] From the perspective adopted here, print is not a revolution against writing or the spoken word, though it has sometimes seemed so to people who lament the impersonality of print while indulging a longing for unmediated personal connections of a kind associated with traditional storytelling. For an example of that nostalgic attitude, see Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov', in his *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. by

necessary for us to imagine that what motivated the Anglo-Saxon poets who kept the fame of the bard alive was 'a longing for personal voice'. What may have mattered more to those people, living in an age that was not so enamoured of self-expression and the cult of individual happiness as is our own, was the idea of social order, as maintained through the power of spoken words exchanged in face-to-face encounters.

To lend substance to these claims, what I shall do in the remainder of this chapter is to juxtapose two moments in what might be imagined to be a literary history of the Anglo-Saxons, could such a history be written. The first of these, drawn from the golden age of Northumbrian learning, is Bede's story of Cædmon. On its face, this tale would seem to represent a moment of triumphant orality. The second, to be introduced in due time, relates to several triumphs of literacy that occurred during the late tenth century, the golden age of Southumbrian learning, when (among other noteworthy works) a remarkable Latin chronicle of England and an even more remarkable book of Old English poetry were written

Hannah Arendt (New York, 1968), pp. 83–110. Rather, in my view, print is an extension of the capabilities of language through efficient mechanical reproduction. In taking issue with a school of thought that postulates a great divide between chirographic and print culture, and hence between late medieval and early modern Europe, I am stating a position that is in accord with the most persuasive work in the area of orality and literacy, in particular Brian V. Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge, 1984). The 'great divide' theory is presented with some restraint by H. J. Chaytor, *From Script to Print: An Introduction to Medieval Vernacular Literature* (Cambridge, 1950); it is carried to a provocative extreme by Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto, 1962). McLuhan speculates rather freely about the impact on human consciousness of electronic communication systems, as well as about the unique capabilities of the phonographic alphabet (such as our own Roman- and Greek-derived alphabet) versus other forms of script. In my own view, orality, literacy, and print culture are best regarded as forming parts of a single continuum rather than representing three separate stages of development. Print culture does not systematically displace the practice of chirographic writing any more than either print culture or the practice of chirographic writing systematically displaces the human voice. Rather, the power of the spoken word is extended and augmented through each of these visual media, just as it is extended and augmented through various electronic media ranging from sound amplification systems to the telephone, the television, the fax machine, and the internet. In the course of time, this process of augmentation fosters scientific analytical thinking to a degree that is impossible in a society based on face-to-face exchanges of the spoken word, as is convincingly argued by Walter J. Ong, 'Writing Is a Technology that Restructures Thought', in *The Written Word: Literacy in Transition*, ed. by Gerd Baumann (Oxford, 1986), pp. 23–50. But such changes, however powerful they may be, do not occur at once or in a totalistic fashion. Older 'oral' modes of thought will always continue side by side with newer analytical modes, whether we are thinking of individual persons or of society at large.

down. While it might be thought that what I intend to dramatize by calling attention to these two historical moments is the gradual yet inexorable displacement of oral modes of thought by literate ones, my point is not quite that. Rather, what I wish to call attention to is the way that oral and literate modes of thought, which were fairly distinct in Bede's day, came to merge in the work of late Anglo-Saxon authors, some of whom helped to cultivate a myth of the bard that had far-reaching implications during the period when the English were becoming a nation.

Bede's Cædmon

Although the Venerable Bede's account of Cædmon's gift of the art of song is a legend whose historicity can be called into question on practically every count, it remains a natural starting point for discussion of the myth of the Anglo-Saxon oral poet. Since it has been discussed elsewhere from various perspectives,[32] my review of it can be brief. In book 4, chapter 24 of his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, completed in AD 731, Bede tells the story of how in a dream one night, the illiterate cowherd Cædmon (who must have flourished about a half century before the time of Bede's writing) was given the gift of a nine-line hymn in praise

[32] Frank, 'The Search', discusses Cædmon at pp. 29–31, offering the incidental suggestion that Bede's account of the passing around of the harp or lyre among guests at a feast may owe its origin to Bede's reading of Isidore's *Etymologies.* The story of Cædmon has often been discussed from the perspective of oral poetry and poetics, notably by Francis P. Magoun, Jr, 'Bede's Story of Cædman: The Case History of an Anglo-Saxon Oral Singer', *Speculum*, 30 (1955), 49–63; Donald K. Fry, 'Cædmon as a Formulaic Poet', in *Oral Literature: Seven Essays*, ed. by J. J. Duggan (Edinburgh, 1975), pp. 41–61; Fry, 'The Memory of Cædmon', in *Oral Traditional Literature: A Festschrift for Albert Bates Lord*, ed. by John Miles Foley (Columbus, 1981), pp. 282–93; and Albert B. Lord, 'Cædmon Revisited', in *Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon World*, ed. by Helen Damico and John Leyerle (Kalamazoo, 1993), pp. 121–37. The multiple texts of Cædmon's *Hymn* are analyzed by Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 23–46, with attention to the possibility that the scribes who wrote out the *Hymn* may have been influenced by their knowledge of oral-formulaic composition. Although not all scholars have been convinced by O'Brien O'Keeffe's claims, they seem to agree in finding those claims thought-provoking. The currency of Bede's tale as an originary myth in different historical eras is discussed by Allen J. Frantzen, *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition* (New Brunswick, 1990), pp. 137–67, passim. Lerer, *Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 42–49, offers a stimulating, though fanciful, discussion of the story of Cædmon as a local variant on a widespread myth of the ingestion of poetic or prophetic knowledge. I discuss the question of analogues to the story's underlying narrative pattern in ch. 8 below (pp. 309–24).

of God the Creator. In that hymn, for which Bede gives only a Latin paraphrase — another sign of that author's relative indifference to English letters — Cædmon retold the gist of the beginning of the book of Genesis in the English language of his day, rendering the biblical account of the Creation into an alliterative metre that apparently was already well established in his day as the medium of English poetry.[33]

Bede's portrait of Cædmon is the earliest literary evidence that has a bearing on the Anglo-Saxons' consciousness of their possession of a native tradition of oral poetry. Cædmon is represented as someone who, when prompted by an angelic command, is capable of composing eloquent verse on the spur of the moment. With some justice, this passage from Bede's history has called to the mind of some readers the impromptu performances of praise-poets from modern Africa.[34]

[33] Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 414–21. While Bede apologizes for providing his readers with only a Latin paraphrase of the hymn, its Old English text is recorded with slight variations both in early glosses to Bede's history (in Cædmon's Northumbrian dialect) and, later, in a continuous translation of that history dating from the late ninth century (in West Saxon dialect). For a brief account of the English texts, see Dobbie, pp. 105–06. In recent years there has been a recurring suspicion that the Old English text of the *Hymn* had no original existence independent of Bede. See in particular Kevin S. Kiernan, 'Reading Cædmon's *Hymn* with Someone Else's Glosses', *Representations*, 32 (1990), 157–74, and G. D. Isaac, 'The Date and Origin of *Cædmon's Hymn*', *NM*, 98 (1997), 217–28. These arguments are convincingly countered by Paul Cavill, 'Bede and *Cædmon's Hymn*', in *'Lastworda Betst': Essays in Memory of Christine E. Fell*, ed. by Carole Hough and Kathryn A. Lowe (Donington, 2002), pp. 1–17. Like Cavill, I regard the theory that Cædmon's *Hymn* is a 'back-translation' of Bede's Latin as overly sceptical, for the rhetoric of Bede's paraphrase (with its phrases set in grammatical opposition to one another) is far more suggestive of the Old English poetic style than of Latin poetic style, even if Bede toned down the extremes of the OE style for the sake of a readable paraphrase. Moreover, anyone who claims that Bede was not translating from Old English must make that venerable figure out to be a liar, since he flatly states that he was. While Bede was adept at selecting and colouring his sources so as to confirm the moral import of his history, and while he also recounted many stories (such as miracles of saints) whose truth may reside more in faith than in fact, one hesitates to say that he ever knowingly told a lie.

[34] On that African tradition, see Jeff Opland, *Xhosa Oral Poetry: Aspects of a Black South African Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983). Opland has developed a parallel between Old English poetry and Xhosa oral tradition in a number of articles, and in two studies he has also called attention to examples of remarkable invention by a master of Xhosa tradition who has visited North America: 'Lord of the Singers', *Oral Tradition*, 3 (1988), 353–67, and 'The Making of a Xhosa Oral Poem' together with 'Renoir's Armring: A Xhosa Oral Poem', in *De Gustibus: Essays for Alain Renoir*, ed. by John Miles Foley (New York, 1992), pp. 411–40. I have not seen Opland's article 'Cædmon and Ntsikana: Anglo-Saxon and Xhosa Traditional Poets', *Annals of*

Indeed, impressed by Bede's emphasis on the spontaneity of Cædmon's performance, Francis P. Magoun, Jr, somewhat extravagantly called it the first 'case history' of an Anglo-Saxon oral poet.[35] It is worth keeping in mind, however, that any facts that underlie Bede's account, assuming that there are facts, can scarcely be separated out from the scene's legendary content. Furthermore, the only reason we know of Cædmon is because Bede thought his story interesting enough to be written down in Latin in a book that was to be read and copied chiefly in monastic settings. While modern interest in Cædmon as an oral poet may be huge, Bede's seems to have been negligible. What mattered most of all to Bede was God's power to work miracles on earth, thereby transforming even a lowly, inarticulate cowherd into a vehicle of divine grace. Nor does Bede show an interest in what Cædmon's companions were singing as they passed the harp at their feasts, as he reports them to have done. Indeed, Bede goes out of his way to make it clear that Cædmon was not an oral poet at the time of his inspiration. Cædmon had never sung before, we are told. The contrast between Cædmon's lack of training in the arts of verse and his sudden, brilliant poetic achievement was precisely what made his story miraculous and hence, for Bede, worth telling.

Here is one feature of Bede's account of Cædmon that oral theorists are likely to take as an expression of mythmaking rather than a record of Northumbrian social history. Albert B. Lord has written a clear account of how oral poets in the Balkans learn their craft, and it is not normally like this. The way that oral poets become adept in their art is by passing through an apprenticeship during which they gradually internalize their craft. Only after the completion of this learning process, which may take years, do they break through into public performance.[36] If lurking beneath Bede's account there does exist a historical Cædmon, then that man would have mastered the arts of song gradually as he matured from being a passive tradition-bearer to being an active or strong one.[37] Cædmon's originality

the Grahamstown Historical Society, 2 (1977), 56–65, in which he draws a specific parallel between Cædmon and a South African poet about whom a similar tale of poetic inspiration is told.

[35] Magoun, 'Bede's Story of Cædman'.

[36] Lord, *Singer of Tales*, ch. 2: 'Singers: Performance and Training' (pp. 13–29). Note also Fry, 'Cædmon as a Formulaic Poet'.

[37] The terms 'active tradition-bearer' and 'passive tradition-bearer' were developed by C. W. von Sydow, 'On the Spread of Tradition', in his *Selected Papers on Folklore*, ed. by Laurits Bødker (Copenhagen, 1948), pp. 11–43. Von Sydow uses these terms to distinguish the person who has the competence to perform a song or story before a group of listeners from the person who knows of a song or story without being able to perform it. See Juha Pentikäinen, 'Tradition-bearer', in

would not have pertained to his gift of song per se. Rather, it would have consisted of his appropriation of the native verse-form and poetic vocabulary of the Anglo-Saxons to express, for the first time, themes drawn from Latin Christian letters.

If this chapter of Bede's history has a hero besides Cædmon himself, then that person is the Abbess Hild (*c.* 614–80), who became Cædmon's patron soon after his poetical gift was revealed. Bede makes clear how dependent Cædmon became on Hild and the brethren of the monastery of Streanæshealch (modern Whitby). It was those monks who furnished Cædmon with stories, deriving chiefly from scriptural history, so that after a period of rumination he might turn them into 'the sweetest verse'. It was then they, according to Bede, who took down Cædmon's words in writing, thereby adding some more pages to the small mountain of scriptural paraphrase and commentary that was growing by a process of accretion throughout the Middle Ages. If what Bede is constructing in this part of his history is an aetiological myth that accounts for the origin of English poetry on devotional themes, then what that myth chiefly affirms is not the status or power of the bard. Rather it is the power of writing, in a monastic setting, to absorb and subsume all things.[38] For Bede, the power of writing specifically subsumed oral poetry, such as Cædmon's hymn of praise; oral history, such as the story of Cædmon's marvellous inspiration (which had not previously been recorded in writing); written history, such as the British monk Gildas's account of the English Conquest, a work that was a major influence on Bede's account of the same events; papal bulls, such as the letters of Pope Gregory the Great that are quoted intact towards the end of Book I; and saints' legends, including his own previously composed prose life of St Cuthbert, which forms the basis of the extended account of that saint in book 4, chs 27–32. It is writing, for Bede, that subsumes the only thing that he would have regarded as valuable in the native oral poetic

Folklore: An Encyclopedia, pp. 802–03. At pp. 173–93 of *Homo Narrans* I discuss the 'strong' tradition-bearer — that is, the person who not only perpetuates a tradition but also transforms it through his or her personal voice.

[38] Two studies published in 1996 emphasize this aspect of Bede's account of Cædmon: Deborah VanderBilt, 'Cædmon and the Translated Word: Orality, Textuality, and Authority', *Mediaevalia*, 19 (1996), 299–317, and Andy Orchard, 'Poetic Inspiration and Prosaic Translation: The Making of *Cædmon's Hymn*', in *'Doubt Wisely': Studies in English Language and Literature* [. . .] *in Honour of E. G. Stanley*, ed. by M. J. Toswell and E. M. Tyler (London, 1996), pp. 402–22. VanderBilt stresses the prestige of Bede's Latin and the significance of his admitting a vernacular poet into the realm of letters. Orchard emphasizes how fully both the story of Cædmon's inspiration and the specific wording of his *Hymn* are indebted to the Latin Christian tradition.

tradition: namely, its ability to offer up words of praise in rhetorically heightened language. It is writing that has the power to turn all aspects of experience into more writing, in a world-building process that has never ceased to exercise its power to assimilate knowledge into new configurations of what is called reality.

Æthelweard and his Chronicon

The story of Cædmon's divine inspiration, as I have said, is the first of two moments in Anglo-Saxon literary history that I wish to juxtapose. In order to reach the second, we must pass over in silence some two and a half centuries of English history and literary development. In addition, we must turn our attention geographically from the north of England to the south, in keeping with the law of gravity whereby all things of weight were shifting from Northumbria towards Wessex, often via the Midlands though sometimes by a direct leap, during the period when King Alfred and his successors in the West Saxon royal line were asserting their authority not only over their own hereditary kingdom but also over almost the whole of Britain.

Around the year 980, shortly before the onset of the second Viking Age and about two years into the reign of King Æthelred the Unready (978–1016), a prominent Englishman named Æthelweard wrote a chronicle that is one of the curiosities of the historiographical literature of the Middle Ages. In large measure what it consisted of was a translation into Latin of the set of vernacular annals we call the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Æthelweard was a historian, but he was not a monk. There is no need to imagine him trying to warm his fingers in an unheated monastic scriptorium like his pattern the Venerable Bede, whose austere labours at the writing desk would have been punctuated every few hours by the liturgical hours of prayer, in a rhythm of work that Bede must have found as soothing as the rising and setting of the sun. Æthelweard was not even a member of the clergy. He was what the Anglo-Saxons called a *weorold-mann* 'secular person' or *lewed mann* 'layman'. It is that fact that makes him so interesting, particularly since he was making a strong effort, through his sponsorship of other writers as well as his own literary efforts, to influence the marriage of Church and state that was the great aim of the Benedictine reformers.

As he spares no pains to tell us, Æthelweard was the great-grandson of King Æthelred I, who ruled over Wessex during the early 860s shortly before his younger brother King Alfred came to the throne. By office as well as lineage, Æthelweard was a man of rank, for he held the position of ealdorman over the south-western shires of Devon, Somerset, and Dorset. Indeed, from 993 until his

death in *c.* 998 he was the leading ealdorman of the realm, with a status not far below that of King Æthelred II, whose persistence in ineptitude was eventually to win him the punning surname *Un-rǣd* 'Ill-counsel' (popularly rendered as 'The Unready').[39] If today Æthelweard is not famed either for his deeds of state or as the author of his *Chronicon*, at least he has achieved minor renown for another reason, for he was the patron of a far greater stylist and scholar than he would ever be. This was the monk Ælfric of Eynsham (*c.* 945–*c.* 1015), the distinguished homilist and defender of Christian orthodoxy.[40] Ælfric dedicated his *Lives of the Saints* to Æthelweard,[41] and he also wrote an English translation of parts of the Old Testament under Æthelweard's direction even while chafing at that task,[42] for Ælfric knew how sharply the dangers of misunderstanding Scripture increased in proportion to a person's ignorance of the system of Christian exegesis. Æthelweard is also known to have been an important owner and donor of books. It has been thought that he may have been the owner of both the Lambeth Bede (London, Lambeth Palace, MS 149) and the Old English Exeter Book (Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS 3501, fols 8–130), two expensive books that were written in the same region and in the same period, if not at the same scriptorium.[43] Ealdorman Æthelweard is therefore one of the chief persons to be taken into

[39] Details about Ealdorman Æthelweard and his *Chronicon* are provided by L. Whitbread, 'Æthelweard and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle', *English Historical Review*, 293 (1959), 577–89, and Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England c. 550 to c. 1307* (London, 1974), pp. 42–46. Basic biographical facts are given by Sean Miller, 'Æthelweard', in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, p. 18. The progress of King Æthelred's notoriety is traced by Simon Keynes, 'The Declining Reputation of King Æthelred the Unready', in *Ethelred the Unready: Papers from the Millenary Conference*, ed. by David Hill, BAR, British Series, 59 (Oxford, 1978), pp. 227–53.

[40] Here as elsewhere in this book, the dates that are cited for Ælfric are those of Theodore Leinbaugh, 'Ælfric', in *Medieval England*, pp. 4–7; see his discussion of that question at p. 4.

[41] *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, ed. by Walter W. Skeat, vol. I, EETS, OS, 76 and 82 (London, 1881; repr. 1966), p. 4.

[42] *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch*, ed. by S. J. Crawford, EETS, OS, 160 (London, 1997; first published 1922 (for 1921)), p. 76.

[43] Robin Flower, 'The Script of the Exeter Book', in *The Exeter Book of Old English Poetry*, introd. by R. W. Chambers, Max Förster, and Robin Flower (London, 1933), pp. 83–94. It is known that Æthelweard gave London, Lambeth Palace, MS 149 and at least one other book to a monastery of St Mary, whether that monastery was St Mary's Crediton (as used to be thought) or St Mary's Tavistock, as has been supposed by Patrick W. Connor, *Anglo-Saxon Exeter: A Tenth-Century Cultural History* (Woodbridge, 1993), pp. 34–37.

account in any assessment of the state of literacy in Latin and English as the first millennium neared its end.[44]

It is not either as a statesman or a patron of letters, however, that I wish to call attention to Æthelweard, but rather as an individual author poised in the act of writing his *Chronicon*. Although he would have had scribes at his disposal for making fair copies of his work, there is little reason to doubt that, for better or worse, he wrote the original text of that history on his own, drawing on skills in Latin composition in which he apparently took some pride. As a powerful magnate, he surely wrote in relatively comfortable circumstances, a copy of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as well as various Latin glossaries at his side in what must have been a well-furnished library for that time. Whether this was a cathedral library or a private one, we have no way of knowing. If the search for the Anglo-Saxon oral poet has proved elusive, the search for the Anglo-Saxon private library has barely begun.[45]

[44] The progress of lay literacy in Anglo-Saxon England has been charted, with some differences of opinion, by C. P. Wormald, 'The Uses of Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England and its Neighbours', *TRHS*, 5th series, 27 (1977), 95–114; Susan Kelly, 'Anglo-Saxon Lay Society and the Written Word', in *The Uses of Literacy in Early Mediaeval Europe*, ed. by Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 36–62; Simon Keynes, 'Royal Government and the Written Word in Late Anglo-Saxon England', in ibid., pp. 226–57; and Kathryn A. Lowe, 'Lay Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England and the Development of the Chirograph', in *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts and their Heritage*, ed. by Philip Pulsiano and Elaine M. Treharne (Aldershot, 1998), pp. 161–204. Of related interest is Helmut Gneuss's wide-ranging study 'Bücher und Leser in England im zehnten Jahrhundert', in *Medialität und mitteralterliche insulare Literatur*, ed. by H. L. C. Tristram, ScriptOralia, 12 (Tübingen, 1992), pp. 104–30. See now also Simon Keynes, 'The Power of the Written Word: Alfredian England 871–899', in *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Century Conferences*, ed. by Timothy Reuter (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 175–97. If one may generalize about the trend of scholarly opinion, it has moved away from the notion of literacy as pertaining only to a clerical elite towards the notion that as the Anglo-Saxon period progressed, even the well-born laity, to some extent, may have shared in a 'literate mentality' (Lowe, 'Lay Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England', pp. 179–80). See the recent review of this question by Hugh Magennis, 'Audience(s), Reception, Literacy', in Pulsiano and Treharne, pp. 84–101 (esp. at pp. 86–91). A. N. Doane, too, provides a succinct review of the emergent arts of literacy in Anglo-Saxon England in his article 'Literacy and Readership', in *Medieval England*, pp. 425–28 (the section on the Anglo-Saxon period). Following Wormald in this regard, Doane doubts that cultured literacy was ever widespread among the laity; he also stresses the extent to which extant Old English literature is 'basically clerical' in nature and, for the most part, derived from Latin models (p. 425, col. 2).

[45] Of necessity, most research into the libraries of early England has concentrated on monastic and episcopal collections. Michael Lapidge, 'Libraries', in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, pp. 285–86,

The contents of Æthelweard's *Chronicon* need not concern us here. If it is a derivative work composed in an aggressively learned style of Latin, and if stylistically it manifests the usual vices that immature, ostentatious learning implies,[46] still it is a most intriguing source from a historiographical perspective. What is of initial importance about it is simply the fact of its existence.[47] The making of a work of this kind by a layman with training in the trivium implies significant changes in the dynamics of literacy in Anglo-Saxon England from the Age of Bede to the second Viking Age.[48] By the 980s, it seems, not far from the heartland of Wessex, talented laymen were not just having vivid dreams; they were writing Latin books.

To be sure, such a momentous leap forward in the progress of English letters was not unprecedented. Æthelweard was not the first layman to write books in Anglo-Saxon England. If we wish to single out anyone in particular for that distinction we must turn to King Alfred, surnamed by posterity 'the Great' in a process of reputation-building that was the opposite of the one that tarnished the

provides a basic orientation to the topic. N. R. Ker, *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain: A List of Surviving Books*, 2nd edn (London, 1964), with Ker's and A. G. Watson's *Supplement to the Second Edition* (London, 1987), is the starting point for research. The topic of private libraries is taken up briefly but in a stimulating way by Helmut Gneuss, 'Anglo-Saxon Libraries from the Conversion to the Benedictine Reform', in *Settimane*, 32 (1986), 643–88, repr. in his variorum collection *Books and Libraries in Early England* (Aldershot, 1996), at pp. 685–87. As the present book is going to press (in February 2006), notice has reached me of the publication of Michael Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford, 2006).

[46] Compare Michael Winterbottom, 'The Style of Æthelweard', *Medium Ævum*, 36 (1967), 109–18, and Michael Lapidge, 'The Hermeneutic Style in Tenth-Century Anglo-Latin Literature', *ASE*, 4 (1975), 67–111. Discussion of Æthelweard's style is complicated by the fact that he shifts abruptly between plain and heightened prose. Lapidge, 'The Anglo-Latin Background', in Stanley B. Greenfield and Daniel G. Calder, *A New Critical History of Old English Literature* (New York, 1986), pp. 5–37, describes Æthelweard's heightened style as 'almost impenetrable, clotted with glossary words of all sorts and couched in incoherent Latin syntax' (p. 26).

[47] As is emphasized by F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1971; first published 1943), 'The mere fact that a lay nobleman of the highest rank tried to write a Latin history of his own country is a most remarkable illustration of the general stirring of intellectual life that accompanied the tenth-century revival of English learning' (p. 461).

[48] On the modes of acquisition of literacy in both Latin and Old English during the Anglo-Saxon period, note especially George Hardin Brown, 'The Dynamics of Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England', *BJRL*, 77 (1995), 111–42, repr. with a postscript in *Textual and Material Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Donald Scragg (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 183–212.

memory of King Æthelred the Unready.[49] Working a century before Æthelweard undertook his *Chronicon*, King Alfred probably deserves that pride of place among a corona of other honours, many of them well deserved though others of them no more than phantoms of that King's late-blooming cult.[50] The work that King Alfred accomplished in the literary sphere was not only substantial and unprecedented. It was also the natural work for a person of his intelligence and enlightened spirituality to undertake during that era, given that the tenor of monastic life had become so unhinged by Viking raids by the time that he had come to power.

As is common knowledge, what King Alfred did was personally to translate from Latin into English, or to have others translate, what he deemed to be the most essential books for educated people of the ruling class to know.[51] King Alfred evidently intended to see that all well-born Englishmen of means would have access to this font of learning once they acquired the basic tools of literacy in the vernacular, whether or not they ever went on to learn Latin, a tongue whose grammar and vocabulary would not have been so easy to master.[52] What Ealdorman

[49] The two kings and their posthumous reputations are discussed in tandem by Simon Keynes, 'A Tale of Two Kings: Alfred the Great and Æthelred the Unready', *TRHS*, 5th series, 36 (1986), 195–217.

[50] The remarkable career of the *figura* of King Alfred in eras subsequent to that king's death in 899 is charted in exemplary detail by Simon Keynes, 'The Cult of King Alfred the Great', *ASE*, 28 (1999), 225–356.

[51] Fulk and Cain, pp. 48–69. According to most reckonings, Alfred's programme of translation encompassed three books of devotion and practical piety (the first fifty of the psalms, St Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*, and St Gregory's *Dialogues*); a book of general history and a book of insular history (Orosius's *Universal History* and Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, respectively); and, as an expression of his own spiritual disposition perhaps, two books of meditative Christian philosophy (Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, including its metrical portions, and St Augustine of Hippo's *Soliloquies*). The prose translation of the first fifty psalms, the translation of the *Pastoral Care*, and the translation of the works by Boethius and St Augustine are generally thought to have been undertaken by Alfred himself.

[52] Alfred's programme of educational reform is laid out in the preface to his translation of Gregory's *Pastoral Care* in a passage that has often been discussed and reprinted; see *King Alfred's West Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care*, ed. by Henry Sweet, EETS, OS, 45 (London, 1871), pp. 2–8; *EHD*, pp. 887–90. D. A. Bullough, 'The Educational Tradition in England from Alfred to Ælfric: Teaching *Utriusque Linguae*', in 'La scuola nell'occidente latino dell'alto medioevo', *Settimane*, 19 (1972), pt 2, pp. 453–94, evaluates the extent to which Alfred's programme was ever put into effect. This topic has recently been reviewed by Paul Anthony Booth, 'King Alfred Versus Beowulf: The Re-Education of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy', *BJRL*, 79 (1997), 41–66.

Æthelweard did was exactly the reverse. He took an authoritative book written in his native tongue and turned it into Latin.

Why did he do this when apparently no one else in Europe was thinking of such a thing?[53] There are at least four possible answers to that question, and each may contain an element of truth. 'Why did the ripe peach fall to the ground?' we may as well ask. Well, there was gravity; there was the ripeness; there was a breath of wind; and there was the lack of a hand to pick it. *Causae* can be multiplied generously, and not necessarily wrongfully, for any event under the sun.

First of all, Æthelweard may have composed his *Chronicon* for the benefit of learned people from abroad. Clerics from Saxony, Gaul, Italy, or Ireland, for example, may have had little or no knowledge of the English language but may still have welcomed access to more recent insular history than was provided by Bede, who completed his *Ecclesiastical History* in AD 731, though it gathered some posthumous additions.[54] The vernacular annals of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* did not respond to the needs or the curiosity of foreigners, but Æthelweard's Latin *Chronicon* could have done so. As Antonia Gransden has remarked, it was 'the only serious attempt by an Anglo-Saxon, after Bede, at historical composition in Latin',[55] and Bede's text was read widely. The book's dedication to Æthelweard's

[53] An apparent exception to this rule is the Latin epic poem *Waltharius*, composed on the Continent 'probably in the ninth century by a German monk': *Waltharius and Ruodlieb*, ed. and trans. by Dennis M. Kratz (New York, 1984), p. xiii. A date in the tenth century remains possible. Most likely 'the Latin poet was familiar with pre-existing Germanic sagas about Walter and Attila and refashioned the tale to his own purposes' (ibid., p. xxiv).

[54] Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 573–77. The latest of the additions is for the year 766.

[55] Gransden, *Historical Writing in England*, p. 42. The afterlife and influence of Æthelweard's *Chronicon* is a question that need not detain us here. As is noted by A. Campbell in the preface to his edition *The Chronicle of Æthelweard* (London, 1962), William of Malmesbury read enough of it to express 'disgust' for its 'resounding and recondite' language (ibid., p. ix, citing the prologue to William's *Gesta regum Anglorum*). The *Chronicon* does not seem to have been noted by other authors until its recovery and first modern printing in the later sixteenth century. Gransden takes the fact that only one manuscript copy of it survived the Reformation as an indication that it was not intended for a wide audience (*Historical Writing in England*, p. 44). On the other hand, the book's utility for readers more adept in Latin than in Old English is indicated by the fact that John Milton made extensive use of it when writing the history of Britain that he published in 1670. When citing his sources, Milton makes a clear distinction between the vernacular annals of the *Chronicle* ('*Sax. an*'. or '*Annal. Sax*'.) and Æthelweard's Latin paraphrase ('*Ethelwerd*'). See Milton's *History of Britain*, ed. by George Philip Krapp, vol. X of *The Works of John Milton* (New York, 1932).

cousin Matilda, the Abbess of Essen (in the upper Rhineland), is indicative of the author's European ambitions.

A less disinterested reason for Æthelweard's project was English patriotism. Æthelweard lived and wrote at a time when the threat posed by the first Viking Age had subsided. Pride in the English people and nation was on the ascendant as the kings of the West Saxon royal line were consolidating their status as rulers of a united England with quasi-imperial ambitions. A nationalistic tone is clearly struck in the poem known as *The Battle of Brunanburh*, for example, the famous hymn of praise to the English royalty and nation that is inserted into some recensions of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* under the year 937, although its composition may date from about two decades later.[56] The other poems that are intermixed with the prose entries of the *Chronicle* under the years 942, 973, and 975 continue to sound this patriotic note.[57] Æthelweard's *Chronicon* is written in the same encomiastic vein as these poems, and it employs language that is no less partisan. To cite one example of this bias, the Viking invaders who harried the land during the reign of King Alfred are not characterized simply as a *here* 'raiding band, army', as they are often called in the anonymous annals of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* that relate to those years. Rather, Æthelweard calls them a *plebs spurcissima* 'a most foul people' and a *plebs immunda* 'filthy people' who are no better than *barbari* 'barbarians' when compared to the English.[58] Clearly the Danes were not on that author's list of peoples to be flattered, despite the participation of numbers of anglicized Danes in the higher echelons of English national life during this period. To cite another example, Æthelweard makes a personal offering to the cult of King Alfred when he praises that King in a eulogy that reads in part as follows:

[56] See the outstanding study by Donald Scragg, 'A Reading of *Brunanburh*', in *Unlocking the Wordhoard: Anglo-Saxon Studies in Memory of Edward B. Irving, Jr*, ed. by Marc C. Amodio and Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe (Toronto, 2003), pp. 109–22. Scragg presents compelling reasons to believe that *Brunanburh* was composed no earlier than the 950s, and thus approximately two decades after the date of the battle. For discussion of the poem as an expression of nationalist sentiments, see Janet Thormann, 'The *Battle of Brunanburh* and the Matter of History', *Mediaevalia*, 17 (1994 for 1991), 5–13.

[57] Janet Thormann discusses this patriotic note and its significance in her article 'The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* Poems and the Making of the English Nation', in *Anglo-Saxonism*, pp. 60–85.

[58] *Chronicle of Æthelweard*, ed. by Campbell, pp. 42–43.

> Denique in eodem anno magnanimus transiit de mundo Ælfredus, rex Saxonum, immobilis occidentalium postis, uir iustitia plenus, acer in armis, sermone doctus, diuinis quippe super omnia documentis imbutus.
>
> (Then in the same year, there passed from the world Alfred, king of the Saxons, unshakable pillar of the people of the west, a man full of justice, active in war, learned in speech, steeped in sacred literature above all things.)[59]

Such glittering praise of King Alfred stands out like a jewel against a drab background when compared with the prosaic manner in which the author of the D version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports that King's death:

> Her gefor Ælfred cyning .vii. kalendas Nouembris, ond heold þone rice .xxviii. wintra ond healf gear, ond þa feng Eadweard his sunu to rice.[60]
>
> (In this year King Alfred died on the seventh calends of November, and he had ruled the kingdom for twenty-eight and a half years, and then his son Edward became king.)

Here the annalist may strike the modern reader as laconic to a fault. We may perhaps be forgiven for momentarily thinking more favourably of Æthelweard's heightened style.

To speak of English patriotism as a motive for Æthelweard's eulogy, however, could lead to misunderstanding of the exact nature of that author's partisanship. What especially motivated Æthelweard's history was his sense of family pride. As has been noted, his book is respectfully dedicated to his cousin Matilda, Abbess of Essen.[61] In a prefatory epistle, Æthelweard makes clear just what their relationship was. Matilda was a granddaughter of Emperor Otho I and Otho's queen Eadgyth. Eadgyth in turn was the daughter of King Edward the Elder (r. 899–924), and hence was the granddaughter of King Alfred the Great. As for his own lineage, Æthelweard specifies that he was directly descended from King Alfred's older brother King Æthelred I. The point of these displays of genealogical lore is not hard to discern. Æthelweard wished his readers to know that he and Matilda shared as their common ancestor Alfred's father Æthelwulf, king of the West Saxons (839–58), whose royal genealogy going back no fewer than forty-four generations makes up a spectacularly bulky insertion into the *Anglo-Saxon*

[59] *Chronicle of Æthelweard*, ed. by Campbell, p. 51. The translation too is from this source.

[60] *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition*, vol. VI: *MS D*, ed. by G. P. Cubbin (Cambridge, 1996), p. 36 *sub anno* 901. In other annuals the King's death is ascribed to the year 899.

[61] The significance of this aspect of Æthelweard's book has been discussed by Elisabeth Van Houts, 'Women and the Writing of History in the Early Middle Ages: The Case of Abbess Matilda of Essen and Aethelweard', *Early Medieval Europe*, 1 (1992), 53–68.

Chronicle for the year 855.[62] Nor does Matilda make an appearance in the *Chronicon* only as the recipient of its prefatory dedication. In the prologue to Book II, Æthelweard addresses Matilda for a second time and states that now that he has finished summarizing the history of Britain up to the time of St Gregory the Great's mission to Kent, he will begin to write *ad nostri* [. . .] *generis proprietatem* 'about the qualities of our own race'.[63] What he means by this somewhat pompous phrase is that he now intends to write in particular about the West Saxon royal line, his own *gens*. As he then turns to books 3 and 4 of his history, Æthelweard increasingly writes about the deeds and achievements of the West Saxon kings seen as the founders *generis nostri* 'of our race' or, more precisely, 'of our family'.[64] For this author, patriotism goes hand in hand with family pride, and the two taken together are the driving mechanism of his history.

Finally, there is a fourth and more speculative answer to the question of why Æthelweard wrote his Latin version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. This is that no one else had done it. Æthelweard may even have wished to demonstrate that an intelligent layman like himself, trained in a manner consistent with King Alfred's programme of educational reform, was capable of participating fully in the world of Latin learning. Once his book was in circulation, it would have served as a precedent giving evidence that any member of the English royal *gens*, or perhaps even any person of rank, was eligible for the respect that pertained to participation in the world of Latin letters. At the same time, the book could have served as encouragement to the other lay members of his family to follow in his footsteps as regards the making of Latin books. This line of thought is speculative, as I have said, but it is not wild guesswork. In any event, Æthelweard's *Chronicon* serves as evidence that by the late tenth century, some lay members of the Anglo-Saxon ruling class had advanced farther in the literary arts than their counterparts in other lands had done. They had also advanced farther, it seems, than has been granted by a posterity that has been so dazzled by Bede's Latinity as to be unappreciative of less polished efforts in that direction. At the same time, as a lay writer, Æthelweard may well have been influenced by the vernacular poetic tradition, and he seems to have gleaned historical or geographical information from oral sources, as well.[65]

[62] This tour de force of a genealogy is introduced with slight variations by Æthelweard as the finale to his book 3; *Chronicle of Æthelweard*, ed. by Campbell, p. 33.

[63] *Chronicle of Æthelweard*, ed. by Campbell, p. 15.

[64] *Chronicle of Æthelweard*, ed. by Campbell, p. 34.

[65] Angelica Lutz, 'Æthelweard's *Chronicon* and Old English Poetry', *ASE*, 29 (2000), 177–214, analyzes the apparent influence of vernacular poetry on Æthelweard's style. Matthew

The search for the Anglo-Saxon oral poet may seem to have hit a hard place when it encounters Æthelweard. That is perhaps one reason why modern bard-hunters have directed their chief attentions towards the formative years of the Anglo-Saxon period, despite the spectres of the imagination that have haunted such quests into the mistier regions of the past. All the same, the relatively cosmopolitan period of the late tenth century remains a good hunting ground for anyone who seeks for evidence of the workings of oral tradition in Anglo-Saxon England and, in particular, who seeks to trace the *idea* of oral tradition in Anglo-Saxon England; for the late tenth century is the period when almost all extant Old English poetry was written down. It is also the time when Latin learning mixed easily with English lore in the form of bilingual charters, multilingual books of charms, Ælfric's bilingual grammar and glossary, Latin books with continuous interlinear Old English glosses, and many similar examples of bilingual competence on the part of authors, scribes, and readers. Granted that the writings of a chronicler like Æthelweard may have little to do with the practice of oral poetry, it is nevertheless true that those writings may cast light on the bicultural conditions where the cult of the Anglo-Saxon bard could thrive in textual form. Whether or not that cult was thriving in the halls of kings and the refectories of monasteries, as it may once have done,[66] at least it could bask in a warm afterlife on the writing desks of people who, while trained in Latin letters, were also attuned to the workings of oral tradition in their native English tongue.

Deor, *Leofric, and the Exeter Book*

So far in this chapter I have focussed attention chiefly on two Latin histories in prose, those written by Bede and by Æthelweard. While study of these two authors speaks volumes about the progress of lay literacy in Anglo-Saxon England, it tells us little about the practice of verse. I now wish to take a more sustained look at Old English verse, and in particular at some poetry that has an obvious

Townend, *Language and History in Viking Age England* (Turnhout, 2002), pp. 110–28, reviews Æthelweard's use of Old Norse personal names and place-names and concludes that he drew his linguistic information in those areas from contemporary oral sources: 'that is, he shows a preference for forms derived from contemporary spoken contact rather than inherited [English] book-forms' (p. 127).

[66] For Alcuin's famous complaint about the songs and instrumental music that were sometimes heard in the refectory, see Chambers, *Intro.*, p. 22 with discussion by Jeff Opland, *Anglo-Saxon Oral Poetry: A Study of the Traditions* (New Haven, 1980), pp. 144–47.

relevance to the search for the Anglo-Saxon oral poet for the reason that it contains vivid portraits of the bard.

The pages of Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS 3501 that for simplicity's sake are called 'The Exeter Book' were written out by a single scribe working in the south of England about the year AD 975. This wonderful florilegium therefore comes from Æthelweard's home turf, and it was written out at virtually the same time that Æthelweard was writing his *Chronicon*, which ends with the death of King Edgar in AD 975. Like Æthelweard, the scribe of the Exeter Book (which is wholly written in the vernacular, with the exception of the five lines of Latin verse that constitute Riddle 90) was competent in both Latin and English letters, for two manuscripts written in Latin have been ascribed to that same hand.[67] Moreover, the Exeter Book is obviously a learned compilation, though some parts of it may be based on popular sources. The book is of particular interest for the way it expresses the themes of Latin devotional literature in English poetic idiom. This is a statement that might wrongly be taken in a condescending way, for it is natural to assume that these English texts were mere derivative copies of Latin prototypes. On the contrary, the English contents of this book include some of the most sophisticated and original poems of the early Middle Ages. A comparison of the Exeter Book *Riddles* with the riddle collections of Aldhelm and Symphosius, for example, ought to convince anyone that these vernacular texts are not only longer than their Latin counterparts, as a rule; they are also often both more complex and more arresting in terms of literary artistry. We do not know who commissioned the Exeter Book or authored its parts, but apparently its contents were culled from various exemplars and were arranged according to a plan that was modified as the volume grew in length. It is one of about fifty-five volumes, chiefly written in Latin, that the prominent churchman Leofric (d. 1072) willed to the library of the new cathedral that he had established at Exeter in 1050 on the site of a former Benedictine monastery.

Leofric deserves a moment's attention, for like Æthelweard, he exemplifies the increasingly complex conditions of literacy that were characteristic of late Anglo-Saxon England.[68] By the time that he founded Exeter Cathedral, he had attained the rank of Bishop of Devon and Cornwall, a region of which he is thought to

[67] These are the Lambeth Bede, as has been noted above (p. 159), and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 319, which contains a copy of Isidore's treatise *De miraculis christi*.

[68] See Frank Barlow, 'Leofric and his Times', in *Leofric of Exeter* (Exeter, 1972), pp. 1–16; L. J. Lloyd, 'Leofric as Bibliophile', in ibid., pp. 32–42; and Michael Lapidge, 'Leofric', in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, p. 282.

have been a native. After being educated on the Continent, he returned to England in 1049 in the entourage of Edward the Confessor, who came to the throne of England in that year after having lived most of his earlier life in Normandy. Before Leofric was appointed to the sees of Devon and Cornwall, he had served as a scribe at King Edward's court. He thus exemplifies the intimate connection between the royal court and the secular clergy that was characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon period in general, and particularly the period of the Benedictine reform. He was probably trilingual, for he was a native speaker of English, his clerical training would have been in Latin, and he would naturally have learned one or more dialects of French during his long stay on the Continent.

As for the Exeter Book, it is one of those remarkable books, like *Beowulf* and *Paradise Lost*, whose contents could scarcely be imagined by the most visionary person if the book itself did not exist.[69] It is sobering to think how diminished our sense of the range of Old English literature would be if this one manuscript did not survive. We would not have *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *The Ruin*, *The Husband's Message*, or *The Wife's Lament*; we would not have a single riddle out of close to one hundred that are preserved in Old English; we would not have two of the four signed poems of Cynewulf, nor would we have the beautiful sequence of poems in celebration of Christ that are known as the *Advent Lyrics* — and the list of potentially grievous losses goes on and on. These are all poems of which no other copy exists. The fact that these poems and many others survive only in this one neatly written compilation, while other works that have figured prominently in my discussion thus far, including Æthelweard's *Chronicon*,[70] do not survive today in any continuously legible manuscript text at all, is one indication that arguments based *ex silentio* are rarely adequate with regard to the literature of this period. When one contemplates the crimes of neglect and commission that were suffered by manuscripts written in the old insular script during later eras — particularly at the time of the Dissolution of the Monasteries, when many items seem to have been sold off in lots, cut up as binding strips, or consigned to rubbish heaps — one can well imagine someone writing a poem on 'The Fates of Books' that would be no less illuminating a work of the imagination than the Exeter Book poem 'The Fortunes of Men', which enumerates in untiring fashion the many

[69] For precise descriptions of the manuscript and its contents, see Krapp and Dobbie, pp. ix–lxxxviii, and *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*, ed. by Bernard J. Muir, 2nd edn, 2 vols (Exeter, 2000), I, 1–41. Kathleen M. Dexter, 'The Exeter Book', in *Leofric of Exeter*, pp. 17–31, introduces the manuscript and its contents for a general audience.

[70] Another example is Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, discussed above.

ways that people die. With its missing initial folios, its ring-shaped stain on fol. 8^{r} (from a misplaced glue-pot or beer mug?) and its subsequent stains on fols 8^{r} to 12^{v}, not to mention its massive burn-hole running in from the end of the manuscript to about fol. 117 , the Exeter Book would surely deserve a few encomiastic lines in such a work. Indeed, the preservation of the Exeter Book has been described as 'one of the miracles of literary history'[71] and hence as something to be marvelled at, like Bede's story of Cædmon or William of Malmesbury's account of King Alfred's dream vision of St Cuthbert. There is the difference, however, that the Exeter Book miracle has the charm of being no more than the truth.

Among the unique contents of the Exeter Book are *Widsith* and *Deor*, two poems well known for their portraits of the idealized court singer. Together with the passages in *Beowulf* to which reference is made above, these poems provide us with the only portraits of the scop to have come down to us from Anglo-Saxon times.[72] Such scenes have a direct bearing on Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards the singer of tales. Worth particular note is the idealized portrait of the itinerant bard that is included at the end of *Widsith*, in a framing passage where the narrator comments on the way of life of singers like the one who is imagined to have spoken the main body of this poem:

> Swa scriþende gesceapum hweorfað
> gleomen gumena geond grunda fela,
> þearfe secgað, þoncword sprecaþ;
> simle suð oþþe norð sumne gemetað
> gydda gleawne, geofum unhneawne,
> se þe fore duguðe wile dom aræran,
> eorlscipe æfnan, oþþæt eal scæceð,
> leoht ond lif somod; lof se gewyrceð,
> hafað under heofonum heahfæstne dom. (lines 135–43)[73]
>
> (So the minstrels of men travel about here and there among many lands, driven by the fates. They give voice to their needs; they speak words of thanks. Sooner or later, north or south, they meet with a person who is discerning about songs and unsparing in gifts, someone who wishes to see his fame raised up before the warriors and to sustain his heroic standing, until everything vanishes, light and life together. Whoever wins fame gains a firm and lofty reputation under heaven.)

[71] Dexter, 'Exeter Book', p. 28.

[72] Since I have written about *Widsith* in a separate chapter (pp. 73–109 above), here I will touch on that poem only briefly.

[73] *Exeter Anthology*, ed. by Muir, I, 238–43 (p. 243).

Surely this is the noblest portrait of the Germanic bard that has come down to us from this period. With its reminder that all the good things of life will vanish in the end, this passage strikes a soberly homiletic tone that is characteristic of the great part of the Exeter Book, where one reminder of earthly transience redoubles another. One's reading of the whole earlier part of the poem is transformed when one reads these lines.[74] All the great kingdoms and rulers whom Widsith has named or extolled in the preceding lines, it seems, have come to no more than this: a name and a reputation, preserved through the words of a singer who is himself imagined as long ago having vanished after somehow managing to leave his words for perusal here. Nowhere else in Old English literature is the theme of the bard's role in bestowing the immortality of fame given such succinct and emphatic expression; and paradoxically, that theme is set forth in a literary passage whose Christian overtones, in the last line (with its reference to events taking place *under heofonum*), undermine the very concept of fame that is being adduced.

Anyone engaged in the search for the Anglo-Saxon oral poet will come upon much of interest in *Deor* as well as in *Widsith*. Indeed, the ending of *Deor*, too, involves a transformative literary strategy whereby one's earlier expectations concerning the speaker must be revised, while what had seemed to be the import of that person's words must suddenly be thought through anew.

Deor resembles not only three others of the so-called elegies (*The Seafarer*, *The Wife's Lament*, and *Wulf and Eadwacer*), but also the fifty Exeter Book riddles that are set in the first-person voice[75] in that it is set entirely in the voice of a persona, Deor himself, who tells his own story. His name is a playful fancy, for it is a transparent pseudonym meaning 'The Fierce One' or even 'The Animal', with a probable play on 'The Dear or Beloved One'.[76] The name is thus suggestive of the character of a tamed wolf, domesticated and yet still dangerous. What the imagined speaker relates is a tale of misfortune, as readers of the Exeter Book

[74] Donald K. Fry, 'Two Voices in *Widsith*', *Mediaevalia*, 6 (1982 for 1980), 37–56.

[75] I follow the count of Frederick Tupper, Jr, in his edition *The Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Boston, 1910), p. lxxxix.

[76] Anne L. Klinck, *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study* (Montreal, 1992; repr. 2001), pp. 167–68, n. to 37b. See the *DOE*, s.v. *dēor* (noun) 'animal, beast'; *dēor* (adj.), 'fierce, formidable, bold'; and *dȳre* (adj.), sense A.2, 'regarded with affection, beloved, loved, dear'. The *DOE* notes s.v. *dēor* (adj.) that 'a number of occurrences are not to be clearly distinguished from *dȳre* (adv.)'. In line 37 of the poem the author alliterates *dȳre* and *dēor* (here used as a proper name), playing off the contrasting meanings of these words in a clear example of Anglo-Saxon paronomasia.

might well anticipate. As he tells us in the last eight lines of the poem, he has lost his position as a scop, or court singer, and has been displaced by a rival singer named Heorrenda. During the first twenty-seven lines of the poem he implicitly likens his situation to that of legendary kings, heroes, and peoples, chiefly drawn from the Germanic Heroic Age, who were once enmeshed in analogous misfortunes but who lived to find redress for their grief. In essence, the text thus presents a message of lamb-like Christian consolation clothed in wolfish Germanic dress.

'Þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg', Deor remarks six times in a refrain that follows each of six verse paragraphs (lines 7, 13, 17, 20, 27, and 42).[77] Although the exact translation of that line has occasioned much debate and will be discussed below, there is general agreement that its general sense is 'That [trouble] passed away; so may this', to cite Gordon's standard translation.[78] The paragraphs that are punctuated by this refrain offer tantalizing allusions to figures from Germanic legendry. First the speaker tells of the misfortunes of the legendary smith Weland, who was hamstrung among his enemies, including his captor King Nithhad, even though he was the 'better man' — that is, the one of higher standing (lines 1–6).[79] Allusion is then made to another player in that same story, Beaduhild, Nithhad's daughter, who was either seduced or raped by Weland and was thereby made pregnant as part of Weland's personal vendetta against his captor. Her consolation was that in due time, her pregnancy resulted in the birth of the famous hero Widia (the Wudga of *Widsith* 124b and 130b), though no direct mention of her son is made here (lines 8–12). More obscurely, Deor then alludes to Mæthhild, a woman who apparently stole the heart of a man named Geat and lost much sleep as a result (lines 14–16). This story remains obscure; the two figures are currently thought to be 'simply unknown'.[80] Although the male figure in this shadowy romance or intrigue is conceivably the equally obscure ancient king named Geat (or Gaut) who figures as an ancestor of King Æthelwulf in the 'super-genealogy'

[77] References to the text of *Deor* in the present chapter refer to Klinck, *Old English Elegies*, pp. 90–91.

[78] R. K. Gordon, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London, 1954), pp. 71–72. The bracketed word 'trouble' is my insertion.

[79] The following summary is in basic accord with the judicious discussion offered by Klinck, *Old English Elegies*, pp. 43–46 and 158–68. It should be read in conjunction with Kemp Malone's edition of *Deor*, 4th edn (New York, 1966); *Exeter Anthology*, ed. by Muir, II, 597–602; and *Eight Old English Poems*, ed. by John C. Pope, 3rd edn rev. by R. D. Fulk (New York, 2001), pp. 111–20.

[80] Fulk and Cain, p. 216.

of the West Saxon kings to which mention has been made, a brave attempt has been made to identify him with the Gautr of much later Scandinavian ballads.[81] As for Mæthhild, whatever her exact story may be, we are apparently being told that though she once suffered from *le chagrin d'amour* as a result of a frustrated affair, she managed to get over her sorrows.

After these passages come separate allusions to two famous kings of the Goths (lines 18–19, 21–26). The first of these is Theodric: that is, Theodoric the Ostragoth, the celebrated king (the Dietrich von Bern of Middle High German legendry) who ruled in Italy from 493 to 526. Although the speaker does not make clear just what the grief was that Theodoric either inflicted or suffered from, there is a likely allusion here to the troubles of the Roman people whom he put under the yoke of servitude. The second Gothic king to be mentioned in the poem is Eormanric. This is the famous Ermanaricus of Latin chroniclers (or Iörmunrekkr of Scandinavian tradition), whose death is ascribed to the year 375. In *Deor* this pre-eminent king is remembered as a cruel tyrant whose subjects were happy to bid him adieu.

There is a surprise in *Deor*, however, one that concerns the myth of the oral poet. Only when one reads the last eight lines of the poem, beginning 'Þæt ic be me sylfum secgan wille' (I wish to say this about myself, 35) does one discover that the refrain, with its message of consolation, pertains to the specific situation of the imagined speaker. According to what we now learn (in lines 36–41), the speaker was once the court poet of the Heodenings — that is, of the people of a ruler named Heoden — until he lost his position to a rival scop named Heorrenda. Here yet another famous story lies embedded in the monologue, for those two legendary figures have a key role in the Middle High German courtly romance *Kudrun* as well as in several Medieval Latin and Old Icelandic sources.[82] In *Kudrun*, the corresponding figure Hôrant has the role of a minstrel who convinces a princess named Hild, daughter of the renowned hero Hagen, to elope with a prince named Hetel, in a concatenation of H-initial names that even the *Beowulf* poet might have envied. Predictably, the elopement of the two lovers has tumultuous consequences, but that story need not concern us here. What matters is that

[81] *Deor*, ed. by Malone, pp. 8–9. F. Norman, '*Deor*: A Criticism and an Interpretation', *MLR*, 32 (1937), 374–81, and '*Deor* and Modern Scandinavian Ballads', *London Mediæval Studies*, 1 (1938), 165–78 (at pp. 176–76), casts cold water on Malone's suggestion, but it is still often repeated as a plausibility (e.g. by Klinck, *Old English Elegies*, pp. 163–64, n. to line 15). Klaeber, pp. 254–55, gives the variant forms of the West Saxon genealogies in summary form.

[82] Klinck, *Old English Elegies*, pp. 167–68; *Eight Old English Poems*, ed. by Pope and Fulk, pp. 119–20.

though the story of Hild and Hetel is undatable, it is clearly set in the Heroic Age of the Germanic peoples. In other words, the fictive speaker Deor uses the rhetoric of first-person address to insert himself into the same legendary world that is evoked in the earlier parts of the poem through allusions to Weland the smith, Theodoric the Goth, Eormanric the Goth, and other legendary figures of the Germanic past.

At the end of the poem we therefore make a discovery that complements a sudden grammatical awakening that calls for separate attention (at pp. 189–93 below). Not only have we been hearing about heroes of the Germanic Heroic Age, those larger-than-life inhabitants of the homeland of the English. In a bold conceit, we are to imagine ourselves in the presence of one of them. This act of historical imagination is not as routine as it may seem. Suppose for a moment that you were an educated Angle or Saxon living towards the middle of the eleventh century — for example, suppose you were one of Leofric's canons settling into his handsome new quarters in Exeter Cathedral in the year 1050. Even as you were sitting in the cathedral library reading this very manuscript that we call the Exeter Book, turning over its neatly written pages, you would be invited to imagine yourself listening to an ancient bard named Deor who was speaking to you directly, over a gap of six centuries or so, from his Continental homeland. Readers of our own age sometimes feel an antiquarian fascination when reading virtually any text of Old English literature, for that literature is bound to retain at least some of the mystique that accrues to old and strange possessions. An educated person living in Anglo-Saxon England at the time when the Exeter Book was in circulation may have experienced a comparable mystique when reading a poem that so deliberately invokes, without the intervention of a narrative frame, an ancient Germanic era of feuding heroes, master metal-smiths, passionate lovers, reckless tyrants, and clear-throated bards.

The Uses of Nostalgia

Deor is a poem built on nostalgia, then: the Anglo-Saxons' nostalgia for their imagined ancestral past. It resembles *Widsith* and *Beowulf* in its portrait of a court singer of ancient times, with the difference that *Deor* has no frame narrative. No authorial voice leads us into and out of the imagined speaker's monologue, as happens in either of the former poems or in such an elegiac poem as *The Wanderer*, with its carefully situated framing passages (lines 1–7, 111–15). Rather, in *Deor*, an imagined court singer of ancient times 'speaks' directly from the page of the tenth-century codex in which his words are anachronistically written.

All the Old English poems to which I have had occasion to make central reference in this chapter are permeated by a similar quality of nostalgia.[83] We see it in the *Widsith* poet's account of a wandering singer who finds favour at the court of Eormanric and who then departs from that King's court richer than before by twelve hundred shillings-worth of pure gold, the value of two splendid arm-rings or necklaces.[84] Those were the glory days for poets! The gifts that are presented to Widsith by Eormanric and his queen, according to this fiction, give that singer something to celebrate when he returns to his homeland to raise up a song before his lord:

> Đonne wit Scilling sciran reorde
> for uncrum sigedryhtne song ahofan,
> hlude bi hearpan hleoþor swinsade. (lines 103–05)[85]
>
> (Then Scilling and I raised up a song with bright and clear voice before our victorious lord; loud to the harp the song resounded.)

A similar vein of nostalgia is tapped in the *Beowulf* poet's evocation of the 'hearpan sweg, / swutol sang scopes' (the sound of the harp, the scop's clear singing, 89b–90a) that echoes in the royal hall Heorot soon after King Hrothgar has finished constructing it, every bit as proud of it, we may imagine, as Leofric ever was with his new cathedral once the canons had begun singing their *lof-song*

[83] While it might be objected that the Anglo-Saxons could not have experienced nostalgia because they had no word for it in their native vocabulary, that claim carries little weight. In their 2003 *History of Old English Literature*, for example, Fulk and Cain plausibly refer to the *Beowulf* poet as 'nostalgic and antiquarian' in his interests (p. 199), and they also see the early thirteenth-century glossator known as the 'Tremulous Hand' as 'nostalgic' in his effort to 'help the language survive' (p. 267 n. 1). The fact that the Anglo-Saxons lacked a critical vocabulary corresponding to the language we use today does not mean that our language cannot be used to account for certain aspects of their world, as long as the risks of anachronism are kept in mind. The very term 'the Anglo-Saxons', for example, falls into the category of 'useful anachronisms'.

[84] *Exeter Anthology*, ed. by Muir, I, 238–43 (at pp. 241–42).

[85] *Exeter Anthology*, ed. by Muir, I, 242. It has been debated whether 'Scilling' is a fellow-singer, otherwise unmentioned in the poem, or a pet name for Widsith's harp. I agree with most readers that the latter conclusion is more likely. As a common OE noun, *scilling* denotes 'shilling', a denomination of money — not an irrelevant association for a singer who is pleased with the recompense he has received. The noun *scilling* is also related to the adjective *scill* 'sonorous, sounding' and the verb *scillan* 'to cause to sound' (B-T, s.v. *scilling*, *scill* (adj.), and *scillan*), and Fred C. Robinson cites two instances of the collocation *scill* and *harp* (in several different spellings) in his discussion of this passage in his chapter 'Secular Poetry', in Pulsiano and Treharne, pp. 281–95 (at p. 283).

in it, their hymns and psalms of praise. Similar nostalgia is evident in the *Beowulf* poet's allusion to the king's thegn who 'knew all manner of ancient tales' and who sang out the story of Beowulf's victory over Grendel, as we have seen, in the early morning hours of the hero's second day in Denmark. 'That is what a good scop does', the poet almost seems to want to say — 'or, that is what a good scop did in days of yore'. One night a monster fight; the next day, out with a poem! There is no question of trial pieces here; no recyclable wax tablets are in sight. There is no sign of the technology of script: no parchment and ink, no pumice and plume and scraper, no copyists who exasperate the good abbot because they fail to proofread their work. Similarly, there is very little evidence here of the apparatus of governance. No allusion is made to the whole system of consultation, advice, negotiation, and compromise that is required if members of a ruling class are to see to their society's welfare in a responsible way. Rather, the poet is imagined to sing, and the audience is imagined to hear, in a hushed environment where the words of singers, like the actions of heroes, are as unpremeditated as the song of the thrush or the leap of a wolf or stag.

Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language defines nostalgia as follows: '(1) homesickness; a longing to go back to one's home, home town, or homeland; hence, (2) a longing for something long ago or far away'. That capsule definition seems to me a better guide to the current meaning of that word than the more detailed *OED* definition, which first of all identifies nostalgia as a form of melancholia — a medical condition, familiar to the eighteenth century, that today we would probably call 'depression' — and then characterizes it in a broader sense as, among other things, 'regret or wistful memory or recall of an earlier time'.[86] When the word 'nostalgia' first came into use in the English language in the later eighteenth century, it denoted a clinical condition that was serious enough to call for medical intervention. Today the word denotes a state of longing that need not be debilitating. It is possible, indeed, for some writers almost to feed on nostalgia in the manner that historians feed on historical facts or as writers of fantasy feed on imagined realms.

In her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, the Russian emigrée writer Svetlana Boym, writing of the different forms of nostalgia that inform the cityscapes of St Petersburg, Moscow, and Berlin, goes beyond the definitions given above and analyzes nostalgia as 'a longing for a home that no longer exists *or has never existed* [. . .]. [Nostalgia is] a sentiment of loss and displacement, but also a romance with

[86] *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, College Edition (Cleveland, 1960), s.v. 'nostalgia', and the *OED* s.v. 'nostalgia'.

one's own fantasy'.[87] A key element of Boym's concept is that the objects of nostalgia need not actually have ever existed in the form in which they are remembered. From the very beginning of her book, she poses the question 'How can one be homesick for a home that one has never had?', assuming that indeed, this paradoxical state of mind is one with which many of her readers will be familiar. From such a vantage point, nostalgia is scarcely a nervous disorder. It can even be a form of healing, a means by which people whose lives have been made subject to upheaval can make accommodations to their pain. In her discussion of 'Immigrant Souvenirs', for example, Boym calls attention to the souvenirs of the Old World homeland that immigrants to the New World sometimes put on shrine-like display in their homes. She argues that sacred domestic spaces of this kind reveal the immigrants' mastery of 'a certain imperfect aesthetics of survival', for those sites represent 'oases of intimacy' in new homelands that are often experienced as alien and impersonal when compared with an imagined past.[88]

The origin of the initial element of our word 'nostalgia' is the Greek word *νόστος*, meaning 'the return home, the homeward journey'. I suggest that *nostos* was just as important a concept for the Anglo-Saxons as it is for many people of the modern period and, indeed, as it was for the ancient Greeks, who fashioned a whole epic poem around the longing of a man for a homeland from which he had been separated during twenty years of war and wandering.[89] For the Anglo-Saxons, nostalgia took the form of a longing for things longer ago and farther away than Ithaca ever was for the errant Odysseus. Nostalgia was the primary mode in which they conceived of their northern ancestral past. That past was one from which the English-speaking people of Ealdorman Æthelweard's day, whatever their actual historical origins were, believed themselves to be separated by impassable barriers of space and time, and yet it was also a past to which some of those same people felt an abiding connection. Paradoxically, the farther into the past that ancient world receded, the more some Anglo-Saxons seem to have wanted to connect with it.

Although no one can say just what the affective value of those feelings of nostalgia were, 'homesickness' would surely be the wrong word to use of them. 'A people's romance with their imagined origins' would perhaps hit closer to the

[87] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, 2001), p. xiii, my italics.

[88] Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, pp. 327–36.

[89] As has been discussed by Douglas Frame, *The Myth of Return in Early Greek Epic* (New Haven, 1978).

truth. Even 'romance' may be too playful a term to use in this context, for what was at stake for the Anglo-Saxons in poems like *Widsith*, *Deor*, and *Beowulf* was not just something pleasurable, though it was surely that as well. Rather, what was at stake was their identity as a people. The existence in English libraries of manuscripts containing poems like these, side by side with manuscripts containing works like Æthelweard's patriotic *Chronicon*, Bede's *Eccclesiastical History*, and the annals of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, implies a collective desire among the people who made and archived these texts to locate an identity for themselves, as a people and as a nation,[90] that differed from that of the neighbouring peoples of Europe. English-language works celebrating the bards and heroes of ancient times were preserved and, one can assume, were enjoyed in some quarters because they summoned so vividly to mind a genealogical or ancestral heritage in which many people of Anglo-Saxon England took pride. That vigorous, patriotic, deeply personal sense of the past complemented, without ever contradicting, the Rome-centred image of the past that many learned persons had cultivated ever since the first missionaries arrived in Kent.

If I were to augment the definitions of nostalgia that are cited above, it would be to emphasize that, like thirst or hope, nostalgia is one of those qualities that can only exist when the means by which it can be satisfied are absent. Paradoxically, nostalgia is a presence that gnaws on absence. Self-evidently, nostalgia cannot exist except in a state of lack. And the lack that a person suffering from nostalgia feels most intensely is the absence of whatever that person imagines to constitute *home*, or what a German speaker might call the *Märchenheimat*, 'the fairy-tale homeland'. To a greater degree than at first may appear possible, those two essential places or states of being, the home and the fabulous, can come to seem coterminous in a person's imagination. It is a curious fact of experience that a person's 'home town' is almost by definition not the place where that person actually lives. Rather, it is the place from which that person has been displaced as he or she has grown past childhood. In a similar manner, the homeland of a whole people is not

[90] To define 'the English nation' in chronological terms applicable to this period, that term applies to the kingdom ruled by West Saxon monarchs from the early years of the reign of Æthelstan to the conquest of that land by Swein Forkbeard of Denmark, a total of about eighty-six years (*c.* 927–1013). As for 'the people who made and archived these texts', once again I am thinking in terms of textual communities. We may first of all call to mind monastic scribes, but scribes did not act autonomously, nor did abbots, all of the time. The cooperation of many people, including powerful laymen and members of the secular clergy, was required in the making of the corpus of Anglo-Saxon literature that has come down to us in verse and in prose, leaving aside the vexed question of the authorship of individual works.

necessarily the land where they reside. Rather, it is the place from which they have moved on, which in time increasingly resembles a fairy-tale landscape that contains elements of the marvellous, as in Jewish émigré painter Marc Chagall's fantastic representations of his Russian homeland. Nostalgia, thus felt as the presence of a lack that cannot be satisfied, is surely an elemental feature of the human condition, and there is no reason to underestimate its power whether in art or life.

Nostalgia is often thought of as something rosy-tinted, but it need not be. If people longed unambiguously for their hometown, then why would they not be living there, if they had any choice in the matter? Chiefly it is in certain romantic moods that people indulge their longing for their hometown, just as it is only in daydreams that adults imagine themselves transported back to the magical realm of childhood. For the most part, we are perfectly aware that hometowns become uninhabitable. Childhood may have been golden, but it was also sometimes brutal and full of fears. We can't go home again, and we don't really want to. In this sense, feelings of nostalgia are not so much mired in the sundered past as oriented towards a conflicted present out of which a superior future has some prospect of emergence.[91]

I call attention to these points because it is clear that the Anglo-Saxons, too, thought of their imagined Germanic past in terms not unlike these. They took pride in their heritage, they admired their ancestral forebears, and they can only have been grateful to have been born in a later age. To return to the poem *Deor*, for example, Weland was not just a master smith; he was a double murderer and possibly a rapist, as well. Theodoric the Ostrogoth was not only the famous conqueror of Rome; he was also a heretic and a tyrant who imprisoned and then killed a profound thinker, the Roman senator and philosopher Boethius, among other good men. According to another story that this poet may have known,[92] Eormanric the Goth, that king of fabulous wealth whom Widsith celebrates for his munificence, also watched with evident satisfaction while his wife was trampled to death by horses. There may have been what the Anglo-Saxons called *drēam* 'merriment' in Heorot in ancient times — noisy, tipsy merriment of the kind that monks apparently liked to contemplate for the reason that they rarely if ever knew

[91] This is a thesis advanced, on very different terrain, by Nicholas Dames, *Amnesiac Selves: Nostalgia, Forgetting, and British Fiction, 1810–1870* (Oxford, 2001). I am grateful to my colleague Henry Turner for calling this book to my attention.

[92] The *Widsith* poet's description of Eormanric as a *wraþ wærloga* 'furious troth-breaker' (verse 9a) suggests, though it cannot prove, that the legend of this King's cruelty to his wife was familiar to the people of Anglo-Saxon England.

it firsthand — but the good old days were not uniformly good for the people who had no choice but to inhabit them. All students of Old English poetry are aware of the dynastic tragedies and the hints of domestic violence that insinuate themselves into the texture of *Beowulf* even before Grendel comes upon the scene.[93] As for the Heroic Age of Germanic legendry that is evoked in *Deor*, what a litany of miseries it calls to mind! 'Many a man sat crippled by sorrows in expectation of nothing but grief', the speaker tells us with reference to the iron-fisted reign of Eormanric. 'They often wished that kingdom had come to an end!' (lines 24–26).

The people of late tenth-century England, the period when the poems of the Exeter Book were being copied out, knew very well that the Gothic kingdom of Eormanric had long ago come to an end. Along with it, sooner or later, had come to an end the Danish Scylding dynasty, the kingdom of Beowulf's Gēatas, and all the other realms of an imagined northern Heroic Age of larger-than-life heroes and sweet-tongued scops. As for their own latter-day age, it was an era of parchment and dressed stone, of coinage and taxation, of a refined and sophisticated literature in two languages encompassing both poetry and prose. It was an age of many warriors but, as the millennium drew on towards its close, of disconcertingly few charismatic heroes. All in all, the educated men and women of that later era probably preferred to sip burgundy from a glass rather than quaff mead from an auroch's horn; and yet when it came time for storytelling in that age of relative refinement, nothing could be better than the heart-stirring tales of ancient times.

Oral Poetry as Cultural Myth

Making wry reference to the nineteenth-century anatomists who were doing their best to carve up some of the great epics of early Europe into what were believed to be their original constituent parts, a famous scholar is said to have remarked, 'I no more believe in interpolators than I believe in ghosts.' My starting point in this chapter has been the observation that some scholars seem to nurse a similar attitude towards oral poets.

Such views seem to me unfair to both the interpolators and the bards. Interpolators have thrived in more manuscript cultures than it would be worth taking the

[93] See in particular Edward B. Irving, Jr, *A Reading of Beowulf*, 2nd edn (Provo, 1999), esp. ch. 1, 'The Text of Fate' (pp. 1–41). Theodore M. Andersson, 'Tradition and Design in *Beowulf*', in *Old English Literature in Context*, ed. by Niles, pp. 90–106, has discussed the pattern of reversal of fortune that is an inescapable aspect of the narrative rhythm of this poem.

pains to trace.[94] As for oral poets, like interpolators, they are legion and they are of all kinds. From an educated perspective, their work can sometimes be labelled good or bad, but normally an oral poem is not aimed chiefly at an educated audience, but rather at people who are connoisseurs of this type of composition regardless of their degree of literacy. Whether or not we call them bards, the existence of persons skilled in the art of oral composition has been documented in just about every society that has been studied by anthropologists. For modern scholars to doubt the presence of such persons in early Britain for no reason other than the fact that their actual words, being made literally of air, have gone the way of all words that are not captured by the technology of script or audio recording seems to me to represent a veritable ecstasy of scepticism. One might as well claim that the lyres that were placed into the great pagan burial mounds at Taplow and Sutton Hoo were put there only as space fillers.[95]

Thankfully, there exists no lack of texts written in Old English despite the ravages of time. Furthermore, given the prominence that the art of oral dictation held in the medieval educational system as well as in the monastic scriptorium, it is a reasonable inference that what at least some of those texts represent are reflexes or reminders of words that were once spoken aloud. This is a point that historians naturally keep in mind when sifting through early English legal documents, many of which serve as reminders of public ceremonies at which certain rights were granted.[96] As for a literary text like *Beowulf*, as Ward Parks has wisely

[94] In this connection it is worth remembering that one of the heroes of Old English literary history, King Alfred himself (or else a person working in his service), made noteworthy interpolations in the Old English version of Orosius's *Historiae adversum paganos*, making that book of greater value to his contemporaries by inserting into it an account of the voyages of the Norwegian fur trader Ohthere and the Baltic merchant Wulfstan, each of whom seems to have had a great adventure once in his life and ever after told the tale. See the OE Orosius, pp. 13–18. No textual marker in London, British Library, MS Additional 47967 (the Tollemache Orosius, which is contemporary with King Alfred) indicates that this part of the history comes from a source other than Orosius. The two passages are therefore interpolations, though of a special kind.

[95] Rupert Bruce-Mitford, 'The Musical Instrument', in *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial*, ed. by Bruce-Mitford, 3 vols (London, 1975–83), III.2 (1983), ch. 9, pp. 611–731, discusses the remains of the Sutton Hoo lyre in impressive detail and also reports on its resemblance to the Taplow lyre, which he also describes with precision (pp. 701–20). Another lyre from a burial site on the outskirts of London (that of 'the Prittlewell prince') has recently been recovered.

[96] C. P. Wormald, '*Lex Scripta* and *Verbum Regis:* Legislation and Germanic Kingship from Euric to Cnut', in *Early Medieval Kingship*, ed. by P. H. Sawyer and I. N. Wood (Leeds, 1977), pp. 105–38; Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century* (Oxford,

remarked, what it too may represent is a crystallization of what was once, in some earlier phase of its existence, a verbal performance:

> Since scholars approach *Beowulf* through texts and employ methods cultivated through a history of textual study, it is always possible to find reasons for believing that the poem is fundamentally textual, just as, if one freezes a cup of water, one can then find ample grounds for believing that the cup contains not water but ice.[97]

The great question in *Beowulf* studies at the present time, it seems to me, is not 'Is the poem oral or literary?' but rather 'How did a literary text like this crystallize out of a pre-existing oral tradition, and what changes (of form, of style, of substance, and of sensibility) occurred in the course of that process?'.

True historical scholarship always depends on vision as well as eyesight. One has to be able to imagine a past that is not there, not only gazing at the material traces of former civilizations but also using the methods of historical anthropology or ethnoarchaeology to make reasonable inferences regarding past cultures by extrapolating from living phenomena.[98] I prefer to see oral poetry both as constituting a living tradition for the peoples who inhabited England before the Conquest and as forming part of a cultural myth whose long process of construction was set into motion as soon as the first missionaries from Iona and Rome introduced the arts of writing to Britain in a systematic way.

Like most myths, the myth of the oral poet is bound to have had a foundation in reality. There can be no doubt that the Anglo-Saxons had some kind of tradition of oral poetry before they developed the technology of script.[99] Given

1999), passim; and Michael T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1993; first published 1979). In their study 'From Oral Ceremony to Written Document: The Transitional Language of Anglo-Saxon Wills', *Language and Communication*, 12 (1992), 95–122, Brenda Danet and Bryna Bogoch approach the language of wills as, in many instances, 'after-the-fact records of the binding event that already had taken place' (p. 97).

[97] Ward Parks, 'Interperformativity and *Beowulf*', *Narodna Umjetnost*, 26 (1989), 25–35 (p. 33).

[98] Examples of studies that adopt this orientation are Aaron Gurevich, *Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages*, ed. by Jana Howlett (Chicago, 1992), and Ian Hodder, *Symbols in Action: Ethnoarchaeological Studies of Material Culture* (Cambridge, 1982), respectively.

[99] Out of respect for that evidence, at least some of it ought to be mentioned here. To begin with, the alliterative metre in which Anglo-Saxon poets composed is essentially the same as the alliterative metre used by all the North Germanic and West Germanic peoples and does not correspond closely to anything that is known from other parts of Europe. Clearly this is a metrical form that predated the arrival of Christian missionaries. Correspondingly, the highly ornamental alliterative language in which all Anglo-Saxon poets composed — 'the jeweled style', as it might

that heritage, they found it perfectly natural to cultivate the conceit that their living traditions of verse were grounded in the art of the bards of ancient days. They liked to trace the origins of their poetry not only to David, the archetype of poetic inspiration in the biblical tradition, but also to the archetypal Deors and Widsiths of early Germanic legend. Through both literature and iconography (as in their illuminated psalters, one of which includes a famous portrait of the biblical David holding a Germanic-style lyre),[100] they promoted the impression that their poetry was descended from the art of ancient singers.

Why did they do this, and why did they do it all the more emphatically as their literary culture became ever more pervasive and cosmopolitan?

While answering that question is difficult, a guess is still worth hazarding. What I suspect chiefly motivated the Anglo-Saxons' search for their oral poetic roots was a desire for the simplicity of direct master-to-man relations in a world where the actual workings of power were becoming ever more remote and

well be called — was surely in large measure the legacy of generations of oral poets. Gifted individual poets like Cynewulf and the *Beowulf* poet may have used that glittery language in an accomplished manner. They may have added new elements to it such as freshly invented compound words. They could not have invented the poetic language itself, however, for a medium of that degree of complexity can only have been the collective work of many persons composing over many years. Moreover, the very terms for poetry in Old English — the two most common terms *giedd* 'song, rhetorically heightened utterance' and *lēoþ* 'song, metrical composition', in particular — owe nothing to Roman influence and refer in their primary sense to words that are intoned or recited rather than written down (as is discussed in *Homo Narrans*, pp. 15–21). The fact that the primary Latin term for poetry, *carmen*, was not borrowed into English is one sign that the preliterate Anglo-Saxons already had an adequate terminology for their native, orally based *ars poetica*, just as they already were in possession of terms for basic religious concepts such as the deity (*God*), baptism (*fulluht*), and the soul (*sāwol*). Moreover, the native English vocabulary that pertains to the art of poetry seems to be based on the assumption that verse, in its primary state, consists of words that are voiced aloud. Certainly that is what the term *giedd* first of all denotes: 'heightened speech', encompassing not only 'poetry' in the sense of 'metrical composition' but also such vocal productions as prophecy, praise-song, public speech, and lament. Even when a learned poet such as Cynewulf speaks of his poetry, he uses the vocabulary of voicing and listening, not of writing and reading with the eye. This is a trait that he shares with any number of other Old English poets, as has been noted by Ward Parks, 'The Traditional Narrator and the "I Heard" Formulas in Old English Poetry', *ASE*, 16 (1987), 45–66. Through such habits of speech, in a rhetorical trope that is still familiar today, the intimacy of face-to-face encounters is simulated even in a situation where a person is reading a book in isolation.

[100] London, British Library, Cotton MSS, Vespasian A I, fol. 30^{v}, has often been reproduced; see for example Michelle P. Brown, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts* (London, 1991), p. 61 and front cover.

impersonal. At a time when real-life social ties were being subsumed into an impersonal, formalized, state-sponsored bureaucracy, with its systems of coinage and taxation and proxy military service, the longing for spontaneous person-to-person relationships naturally became more pronounced.[101]

This desire finds eloquent expression in *The Wanderer* in the image of an exiled retainer leading a comfortless existence on icy seas. Bereft of his former companions, he looks back nostalgically to a time years before when he served his former lord in the meadhall:

> Þinceð him on mode þæt he his mondryhten
> clyppe ond cysse ond on cneo lecge
> honda ond heafod, swa he hwilum ær
> in geardagum giefstolas breac. (lines 41–44)[102]

(It seems to him in his mind that he is embracing and kissing his liege-lord and laying his hands and head on his knee, just as previously, from time to time in days of old, he partook of the gift-throne.)

It is hard to imagine a more poignant expression of longing for a lost home of the heroic imagination, one that offers the solace of unmediated personal devotion between master and man. In a similar manner, Old English wisdom literature such as the Cotton Maxims and the Exeter Maxims reveals a longing for unequivocal wisdom,[103] while the Old English heroic poem *The Battle of Maldon* reveals a

[101] For the sake of convenience I use the phrase 'master/man relations' in a shorthand manner to refer to either men or women, whether in the role of masters or of subordinate figures. Women in Anglo-Saxon society could be the masters of men, just as they could be the masters of other women. For the social history of the period that I am chiefly referring to here (*c.* AD 925–1016), there exists no one good study of which I am aware. In her pithy book *The Beginnings of English Society*, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth, 1974), Dorothy Whitelock makes clear how complete was the transformation of Anglo-Saxon society from the early tribal period to the period of later statecraft, and yet how strong a grip that earlier period continued to have on the Anglo-Saxon imagination. Valuable studies from the literary side that treat the conflicted condition of Anglo-Saxon England at the turn of the first millennium include Malcolm Godden, 'Money, Power, and Morality in Late Anglo-Saxon England', *ASE*, 19 (1990) 41–65; Godden, 'Apocalypse and Invasion in Late Anglo-Saxon England', in *From Anglo-Saxon to Early Middle English: Studies Presented to E. G. Stanley*, ed. by Godden, Douglas Gray, and Terry Hoad (Oxford, 1994), pp. 130–62; and Hugh Magennis, 'Treatments of Treachery and Betrayal in Anglo-Saxon Texts', *ES*, 76 (1995), 1–19.

[102] Klinck, *Old English Elegies*, p. 76.

[103] For the Old English text of the Cotton Maxims (also known as *Maxims II*), see Dobbie, pp. 55–57; for the Exeter Maxims (also known as *Maxims I*), see *Exeter Anthology*, ed. by Muir,

fascination with lavishly heroic responses to a crisis that pertained to the real world of the late tenth century, not to a never-never land of the imagination.[104] The gnomic voice, heroic aspirations, and the idea of the bard seem to have thrived in Old English poetry at the very time when actual social relations increasingly called for negotiation and compromise. A tendency towards nostalgia on the part of Anglo-Saxon authors seems to have become especially marked near the onset of the second Viking Age, when the kingdom of King Æthelred the Unready was put under enormous strain by wave after wave of northern invaders, leading in the end to the near bankruptcy of the nation and Æthelred's expulsion from the realm. But the seeds of this nostalgia are to be sought earlier, I believe, during the more peaceful decades of the mid-tenth century, when local cultures and regional allegiances were systematically being subsumed into an ascendant English nation.

It is surely significant that images of the scop take on a dominant role in works that were composed, or at least that were in circulation,[105] during the period when lay literacy was waxing, when literary bilingualism and trilingualism were on the increase, when written laws and contracts were superseding the spoken pledge, when a more sophisticated scientific consciousness was beginning to find written expression, and when a strong, centralized state was doing its best to subsume man-to-man relations into an efficient system of delegated authority. It seems to have been especially during that relatively late period that some Anglo-Saxons

I, 248–57. The two texts (or sets of texts) are conveniently edited and translated by T. A. Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 64–79.

[104] In '*Maldon* and Mythopoesis' (pp. 203–36 below) I discuss that poem and its legendary nexus as an example of Anglo-Saxon mythopoesis in response to Viking troubles.

[105] *Deor* is impossible to date other than to say that its composition precedes the writing out of the Exeter Book in *c.* AD 975. *Widsith* used to be regarded as one of the earliest poems composed in English, but more recent opinion places its composition in the tenth century (see pp. 77–78 above, note 13). The date of *Beowulf* remains one of the most vexed questions in Old English literary studies, but many scholars now read that poem in a tenth-century context, even though some of its elements may be older. Recent studies with a bearing on the date of *Beowulf* are reviewed in notes 5 and 47 to chapter 1 above. Michael Lapidge, 'The Archetype of *Beowulf*', *ASE*, 29 (2000), 5–41, has made such a strong case on paleographical grounds for an early eighth-century exemplar that one is in doubt what to make of the whole matter. Historical and cultural grounds for dating the poem as we have it point strongly, in my view, to the tenth century, and yet an original version of the poem, it seems, may have been recorded (in a somewhat different form?) two centuries earlier. Obviously, criticism of *Beowulf* has not yet arrived at a resting point as regards dating. Lapidge's study, whether he approves of this development or not, may have the revolutionary effect of thrusting us back into a pre-Tolkien era of 'multiple *Beowulfs*', all but one of them hypothetical.

wished to associate their art of poetry not just with parchment and ink, but also with the fellowship of the mead hall. Certainly it is then that poetry was in circulation that celebrated the personal bonds between singer, patron, and audience, and that did so in verse that purported to be the words of the 'speaking bards' Widsith and Deor, who tell their own stories.

The cultural myth of which I am speaking was not unique to the Anglo-Saxons, though the Anglo-Saxons developed it in culturally specific terms. The Greeks had something like it with their cult of Homer, the blind bard of rocky Chios. The people of Anglo-Norman England had something like it with their tale of the minstrel Taillefer reciting the *Song of Roland* in the vanguard of the troops at the Battle of Hastings — yet another bit of apocrypha to which William of Malmesbury contributed his fair share.[106] The British Romantics had their own version of the myth of the oral poet with their cult of Ossian and their idolatry of the ploughman-poet Robert Burns, who was just as competent in accepted modes of English poetry as in the more muscular Scots vernacular style but who quickly learned the value of having that fact overlooked.[107] The early twentieth-century English folksong collector Cecil Sharp fostered a similar myth of oral poetry through his efforts to collect songs and ballads 'from the crystal spring' — that is, from the lips of English 'peasants' or from hill folk of the Southern Appalachians — when in fact what Sharp sometimes recorded, whether he was aware of this fact or not, were the words of printed texts that rural singers had memorized from broadsides and garlands and had set to a favourite tune.[108]

A fascination with oral poets is therefore not just a phenomenon of the eighteenth century, nor of the twelfth, nor of any other single historical period. The cult of the bard is likely to emerge wherever an oral tradition is strongly

[106] William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum*, ed. by Mynors, I, 455.

[107] Mary Ellen Brown provides a brief account of Burns and folk tradition in her article 'Burns, Robert (1759–1796)', in *Encyclopedia of Folklore and Literature*, ed. by Brown and Bruce A. Rosenberg (Santa Barbara, 1998), pp. 76–78, and a detailed account in her book *Burns and Tradition* (London, 1984).

[108] Dave Harker, *Fakesong: The Manufacture of British 'Folksong' 1700 to the Present Day* (Milton Keynes, 1985) discusses Cecil Sharp from a revisionist stance, attempting to pierce through the myths that have brought Sharp many admirers as the founder of modern English folksong scholarship. A similarly cautionary stance should be adopted with regard to the 'sons of Sharp' (or the 'sons of Kittredge') who recorded ballads from rural singers in the British Isles and North America during the 1920s and 1930s. What rural singers sometimes sang for these collectors were versions of quasi-traditional songs that they had learned from the radio or other mass-mediated sources.

impacted by the technology of script or print. Cults of the bard are likely to gain in allure to the extent that the levelling tendencies of writing, together with the impersonality of written communication, foster nostalgia for the charm of an era of bards and lavish patrons. Cults of the bard tend to become more poignant when accompanied by a mood of anxiety regarding the loss of treasured aspects of the past, including the intimacy of face-to-face social relations and the use of the spoken word to bind the members of a tribe or community together.

The search for the Anglo-Saxon oral poet thus began with the Angles and Saxons. It probably commenced as soon as missionaries from Rome and Iona — those people of the book — began to convert the English-speaking people of Britain to Christianity and teach them the Holy Word. It gathered strength during the tenth century, which in retrospect could be termed the golden age of Old English letters, and it seems to have held its strength during the eleventh century, which was the period of most prolific copying of vernacular texts.[109] The trauma of the Norman Conquest had no power to kill it, for it received a special flourish at the hands of historians like William of Malmesbury, who could safely cultivate the myth of the Anglo-Saxon bard once the Anglo-Saxons themselves had been pacified and their former kingdom had receded into a harmless *Märchenland* of the imagination. The models of oral performance that emerged during that long period of the Middle Ages became the source of layers upon layers of nostalgia that have been a potent aspect of the Western sensibility up to the present day. And there is no reason to think that the last bard will ever die. On the contrary, the myth of the oral poet is likely to continue to thrive long after our present world has become the substance of future nostalgia.[110]

[109] Neil R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford, 1957), pp. xv–xix, lists virtually all manuscripts that contain Old English, grouped according to their apparent date of writing. Most are of eleventh-century date.

[110] Readers of Roy M. Liuzza's eloquent essay '*Beowulf*: Monuments, Memory, History', in *Readings in Medieval Texts*, ed. by David Johnson and Elaine Treharne (Oxford, 2005), pp. 91–97, will find much there that reinforces points made in the present chapter. Equally relevant is Fred C. Robinson, 'Retrospection in Old English and Other Early Germanic Literatures', *The Grove* (University de Jaén), 8 (2001), 255–76.

Excursus

THE REFRAIN IN *DEOR*

While the refrain in *Deor* has been written about often and with great learning, it remains (I think) not altogether well understood. Its precise rhetorical strategy deserves attention here, not least because the interpretation of that line (reiterated at lines 7, 13, 17, 20, 27, and 42) has a bearing on the search for the Anglo-Saxon oral poet that is the topic of the preceding chapter.

Although the paraphrase of the refrain that I offer there (at p. 172 above) — 'That passed away; so may this' — is in accord with modern English idiom, it fails to do justice to the delicate grammar of this syntactically odd Old English line, with its two dependent pronouns *þæs* and *þisses* in the genitive singular case. The modal auxiliary verb *mæg*, too, is used here in an unusually artful way. I therefore propose a somewhat different reading of the refrain than has been offered before in the critical literature.[1]

To begin with what ought to be an uncontroversial point, the OE auxiliary verb *mæg* normally denotes 'can, has the power to' rather than 'may, might'. When

[1] For a helpful overview of problems associated with the refrain see Anne L. Klinck, *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study* (Montreal, 1992; repr. 2001), pp. 160–61, n. to line 7, and p. 168, n. to line 42. Among critical studies, not to be overlooked is Joseph Harris, '*Deor* and its Refrain: Preliminaries to an Interpretation', *Traditio*, 43 (1987), 23–53; cf. Knud Schibsbye, '*Þæs oferēode; þisses swā mæg*', *ES*, 50 (1969), 380–81, and John Erickson, 'The *Deor* Genitives', *Archivum Linguisticum*, n.s., 6 (1975), 77–84. Two recent studies of the poem as a whole are by Frederick M. Biggs, 'Deor's Threatened "Blame Poem"', *SPh*, 94 (1997), 297–320, and Maria Vittoria Molinari, 'Overcoming Pagan Suffering in *Deor*', *Linguistica e Filologia*, 8 (1998), 7–28. Biggs approaches *Deor* as an example of the ancient genre of 'blame poem', while Molinari, emphasizing a Christian perspective that remains muted in the text, sees *Deor* as an attack on traditional heroic values.

Kevin Crossley-Holland, for example, translates the refrain as 'That passed away, this also may',[2] he dilutes the speaker's claim by introducing a note of uncertainty. In his modern English version it almost appears as if Deor, uncertain about the future, were saying 'This also may pass away, but then again it may not', when the Old English phrase much more emphatically affirms the likelihood of change. The internal rhyme 'away/may' in Crossley-Holland's translation enhances the line's aural quality, but at the cost of weakening its sense.[3] What the second half of the line means is 'This too will pass', to express the speaker's wisdom in the Solomonic form of a proverbial phrase whose evolution Harris has discussed at length, drawing on both biblical and folkloric sources.[4]

Second, there ought to be little doubt that the two demonstrative pronouns *þæs* and *þisses* are genitive forms that depend on the main verb *ofergan*, which here appears in the preterite singular form *ofereode*. This Old English verb has several possible meanings, but here it is unlikely to mean anything other than one or both of two things: either 'overcome' (if used as a transitive verb) or 'pass on or away' (in a figurative sense, if the verb is used intransitively).[5] As for the two genitive pronouns, Bruce Mitchell has claimed that they function here as genitives of 'point of time from which', so that he tentatively translates the refrain 'It passed over from that; it can from this'.[6] Klinck and other commentators, however, have reasonably held that what the speaker is referring to is not simply a point in time, but rather a state of being. What the speaker is saying, if the main verb is taken intransitively, is that things changed in *that* regard (that is, those troubles passed away), and things can or will change in *this* regard, too, whatever the concrete referents of 'that' and 'this' are taken to be from strophe to strophe.

[2] Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology* (Oxford, 1999; first published 1982), pp. 7–8.

[3] As T. A. Shippey has remarked in *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 200 n. 39, '*mæg* does not mean "may" — a word too weakly hopeful'.

[4] Harris, '*Deor* and its Refrain'.

[5] Klinck, *Old English Elegies*, p. 161. The intransitive use of the verb *ofergan* is fairly commonplace. The transitive use of it in this instance is not to be ruled out, although as Klinck notes, 'one would expect an accusative rather than a genitive with this usage'. Hyeree Kim, 'On the Genitive of [the] Anglo-Saxon Poem *Deor*', *NM*, 96 (1995), 351–59, argues that this is one of two instances in Old English where *ofergan* governs the genitive case. His arguments receive some support from Gwang-Yoon Goh, 'Genitive in *Deor*: Morphosyntax and Beyond', *Review of English Studies*, n.s., 52 (2001), 485–99.

[6] Bruce Mitchell, *Old English Syntax*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1985), I, §1405.

There is a third question to be posed in regard to the literal meaning of the refrain of *Deor*, however. What is the implied subject of the auxiliary verb *mæg*?

Grammatically, *mæg* can be either of two things: the third person singular form of the auxiliary verb *magan*, or the first person singular form of that same verb. Where *mæg* is preceded by reference to the sufferings of a single named person (Weland, Beaduhild, or Mæthhild), the reader or listener is naturally encouraged to take *mæg* in the third person singular and to interpret the implied main verb *ofergan* in the sense 'overcome', here governing the genitive case. If that reading is adopted, then the first half of the refrain can be translated with an active construction: 'he [or she] got over [or overcame] that'. As an alternative reading, the impersonal third-person sense 'it changed [that is, things changed] in regard to that' can still remain in the back of one's mind. With verse paragraphs 4 and 5 — passages that refer to afflictions suffered by numbers of people, whether Romans or Goths — the singular verb *ofereode* can only function in an impersonal sense and the phrase must mean 'things changed' for them.

As for the second half of the refrain, *þisses swa mæg*, in five successive instances it seems to ask to be taken impersonally in the sense 'This too will pass'. At the very end of the poem, however, after these five verse paragraphs with their legendary allusions are concluded, there occurs a brilliant reversal of expectations. Only after the speaker, waxing autobiographical, has recounted the loss of his former place of honour among the Heodenings does one realize that the auxiliary verb *mæg* is best construed here in the first person singular voice and in a transitive sense. What the clause *þisses swa mæg* means in the very last line of the poem is therefore, 'I can get over (*ofergan*) this trouble, too'.[7]

Endings are bound up with beginnings, particularly in the reading of lyric poems. If one now rereads the beginning of the poem with that same sense of the refrain in mind, one can see its relevance here as well. 'He (or she) got over that trouble', Deor can now be understood to be asserting from the start. 'I can get over mine, too.' In rhetoric comparable to what is seen in many an Exeter Book riddle, a playful ambiguity is held in suspension until the very end of the poem,

[7] Kim, 'On the Genitive', translates this verse 'may I overcome this also' (p. 355), but the fact that the auxiliary verb *mæg* is in the indicative mood counts against the first part of this translation. What *mæg* means here is 'I can'; see note 3 above. Molinari, 'Overcoming Pagan Suffering', reads *mæg* as a subjunctive and interprets it as expressing 'an exhortation projected into the future, which is what we would expect in a text that is elegiac and homiletic' (p. 16). Since the present subjunctive singular form of *magan* is *mæge*, however, not *mæg*, that reading can be discounted; the text is not homiletic in its rhetoric at this point (or any other), and neither is it particularly elegiac at its close.

when one's knowledge of what the right 'answer' is retrospectively affects the way in which one now can construe the whole text. With *Deor*, the ambiguity that is held in suspension from line 7 to line 42 of the poem is resolved through the addition of autobiographical information that produces a key unlocking the grammar of the refrain.

Of course, there is little new under the sun. After working out the solution to the refrain in *Deor* that I have just described, whereby its meaning is seen to depend on a calculated ambiguity and what has had all the appearance of an impersonal third-person construction must suddenly be reconceived as an active first-person one, I discovered that at least one translator of *Deor*, Charlton M. Lewis, in a version of the poem published in 1900, takes *mæg* as a first-person singular verb from the start. If one abstracts his translations of the first five instances of the refrain from the passages in which they are embedded and reads them sequentially, those lines read as follows:

> Yet he strove on, and overcame; nor shall *my* strength be less. (line 7)
> Yet she strove on, and overcame; shall I my griefs deplore? (line 13)
> Yet these strove on, and overcame; I can endure as well. (line 17)
> Yet these strove on, and overcame; shall I not stand the test? (line 20)
> He has his day; he overcame; but peace! break not, my heart! (line 27)[8]

If one forgives Lewis for writing in a heightened style that has now gone out of fashion, and if in addition one overlooks his habit of varying the words of a refrain that is repeated verbatim in the original text, one virtue of his translation stands out. That is the way he handles the phrase *þisses swa mæg*, which he interprets as an active first-person construction from the start.[9] At least one vital aspect of the

[8] *Select Translations from Old English Poetry*, ed. by Albert S. Cook and Chauncey B. Tinker (Westport, 1970; first published 1902), pp. 58–60. Lewis construes strophes 3 and 4 differently from Klinck and other recent critics, but that point has no bearing on my argument. A similar reading of the refrain is offered by Jacqueline Banerjee, '*Deor:* The Refrain', *The Explicator*, 42.4 (1984), 4–6; she translates the refrain 'In that situation he [Weland] overcame; in these circumstances, in the same way, I can' (p. 4).

[9] Two other translations of *Deor* with which I am familiar call attention to the way that *mæg* can function as a first-person verb (and, at the end of the poem, must do so). Francis B. Gummere, *The Oldest English Epic* (New York, 1925), translates the refrain 'That he [she, they] surmounted: so this may I!' (pp. 186–88). Richard Hamer, *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse* (London, 1970), translates, 'That passed away, and so may this from me' (pp. 90–93). Many other translators either do not perceive this aspect of the poem's art or choose not to try to imitate it. I have seen no translation that mirrors the calculated ambiguity of the Old English refrain, and perhaps nothing along those lines can be achieved in the grammar of modern English.

poetic strategy of *Deor* is thus preserved. The delicate grammatical ambiguities of the Old English text remain locked in the original language, however. With Lewis's translation one loses the shock of recognition that results when, at line 42, one discovers that what one had assumed to be one kind of grammatical construction can (and must) be read in a different manner.

The point of the present analysis should perhaps be made explicit. I have wished to show, as was stated above (at p. 171), that 'the ending of *Deor*', like that of *Widsith*, 'involves a transformative literary strategy whereby one's earlier expectations concerning the speaker must be revised, while what had seemed to be the import of that person's words must suddenly be thought through anew.' This is a reversal that takes place in grammar as well as substantive content. Through this reversal, the speaker of the poem is now, but only now, understood in his true character as a figure of the Age of Migrations, striving in an uncowed manner to work his way through the troubles that were so characteristic of that era, and that he has come to know through sharp personal experience.

Calling a Bard a Bard, or Not

Many people may find it difficult to conceive of the 'bard' these days except in terms of the hoary stereotype of a bearded sage plucking a harp before the table of a medieval Celtic or Germanic chieftain. Bards and minstrels rub shoulders together in some lost corner of the Romantic imagination. It is therefore refreshing to see that in his article 'Bard', the Finnish folklorist Lauri Harvilahti writes of bardic traditions from a different and less idealizing perspective.[1]

Writing within the European tradition of comparative ethnography, Harvilahti first summarizes the importance of the idea of the bard in academic scholarship during the era of Thomas Percy and James MacPherson and, more recently, in 'invention-of-tradition' festivals such as the Welsh *Eisteddfod* and its Irish and Scottish equivalents the *Oireachtas* and the Mod. He then offers a lucid overview of traditions of oral epic poetry that have been recorded in parts of China and Tibet, among the Turkic peoples of the Middle East and central Asia, and in parts of West Africa, among other regions. He summarizes the general features of the art of composition in performance that has traditionally been the means of disseminating such works, as has been well described by Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord and other scholars who have conducted field research with living singers. He then touches on the ways in which, in recent centuries, living traditions of oral poetry have been both threatened with extinction and made subject to appropriation by dominant groups or ideologies that would turn them to partisan ends.

Harvilahti thus uses the term 'bard' synonymously with 'singer'. In his view, field research undertaken into living traditions of oral poetry in many parts of the

[1] Lauri Harvilahti, 'Bard', in *Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, pp. 84–89.

world has revealed 'how important it has been to challenge the literary-based concept of the epics and bardic traditions'.[2]

That concluding phrase, 'the epics and bardic traditions', is an awkward one with which to conclude what is otherwise a gracefully written essay, and at first I thought that there was a misprint here and that what the author meant to say was 'epic and bardic traditions'. I now see that what he is referring to are (1) literary-based concepts of certain epics of the Western tradition that are named earlier in his article — specifically, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, the *Nibelungenlied*, and the *Song of Roland* — and (2) the literary-based concept of bardic traditions that was so influential during the age of Percy and MacPherson. In other words, Harvilahti challenges his readers to evaluate the bardic poetry of the world in its own terms, and not in the foreign terms of well-educated persons who have not known such traditions at first hand, and thus have scarcely been able to conceive of them except through inappropriate models.

In a manner that is consistent with Harvilahti's approach, Professor Frank's article 'The Search for the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet' shows reasons to dissociate *Beowulf* from the modern Western European literary cult of the bard. My own preceding chapter does so in its own way as well, suggesting ways in which certain features of that poem can be illuminated through comparison with the genuine traditions of Eurasian and African oral poetry that Harvilahti speaks of as 'bardic'.

To be sure, I myself would not use the term 'bardic' to refer to those living traditions. That reluctance derives from my awareness of the negative connotations of a word of respectable Celtic origins that was borrowed into English at the end of the Middle Ages under inauspicious circumstances from the start. A Scottish statute dating from *c.* 1500, for example, calls for the branding of all bards and sturdy beggars: 'all vagabundis, fulis, bardis, scudlaris, and siklike idill pepill sall be brint on the cheek'.[3] Another statute from the same period allows for bards to be strung up on the spot, once they have been tortured to everyone's satisfaction: 'feinzied fooles, bairdes, [and] rynners about [. . .] after sundrie punishments, may be hanged'.[4] Three centuries later, Sir Walter Scott went to some length to invert this negative image of the bard so as to admit him, even if in rags, into the drawing rooms of polite society:

[2] Harvilahti, 'Bard', p. 88.

[3] 'All vagabonds, fools, bards, tinkers (?), and similar idlers shall be branded on the cheek': *OED*, s.v. 'bard', under sense 2.

[4] 'Phony half-wits, bards, and vagabonds [. . .] after sundry punishments may be hanged': *OED*, s.v. 'bard', under sense 2.

> The last of all the Bards was he,
> Who sung of Border chivalry;
> For, well-a-day! Their date was fled,
> His tuneful brethren all were dead; [. . .]
> The bigots of the iron time
> Had called his harmless art a crime.
> A wandering harper, scorned and poor,
> He begged his bread from door to door.[5]

The Enlightenment city of Edinburgh that once gave shelter to this poor waif from the Middle Ages is now transfigured, however, and many of its older neighbourhoods have been cleared away to make room for full-efficiency flats. Today it would seem wise to reserve the use of the terms 'bard' and 'bardic' either for the native poetry of medieval Ireland or for the modern revival of interest in the ancient Celtic world. There is nothing wrong with the word 'bard' except that it has been poisoned by its history of use as either a swear-word or a vehicle for wishful thinking.

[5] Walter Scott, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel, 1805*, facsimile reprint introduced by Jonathan Wordsworth (Oxford, 1992), pp. 3–4.

Response

'The Battle of the Heroic Lay' Rejoined, or Not

Where there are bards, one would think, there must be heroic lays. This is a line of thought that might seem irresistible, and yet it demands inspection.

When the *Beowulf* poet tells of a scop at Hrothgar's court who entertains the gathered warriors by singing a heroic lay about two battles fought at Finnsburh, there is no question that that singer is just as 'real' as any other figure in that poem. His lay, similarly, is just as 'real' as any other words set into the mouth of any other character. On the other hand, when present-day scholars speak of the oral poets of ancient Germania and of the lays they sang, they are largely fantasizing, for no such poets and lays can be produced. Perhaps those bards were there, singing as the scholars would have them sing. Perhaps they were not, as Professor Frank suspects. Beyond a certain point, statements about such things (either pro or con) must be accepted as articles of faith, for hard evidence is lacking.

In an essay published in 1987, 'The Germanic "Heroic Lay" of Finnesburg', the eminent Anglo-Saxonist E. G. Stanley calls attention to a remark of mine (published in a book that appeared four years earlier)[1] concerning 'short alliterative lays on historical or legendary themes' that may once have circulated on the Continent. Stanley begins his essay with characteristic wit:

> In scholarship, old established views never die: like old soldiers, they only fade away, and some of them seem to take an unconscionable time doing even that. As I began to write on the Germanic 'heroic lay' I soon wondered if I was not proposing the flogging of a dead horse. But then, I was reading a book on *Beowulf* and its tradition published in 1983. Suggesting that its author, J. D. Niles, may daringly have introduced some 'heretical notions' in what he proposes, he says:

[1] Stanley refers to ch. 2, 'The Art of the Germanic Scop', of my book *Beowulf: The Poem and its Tradition* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), at p. 50.

> *Most scholars agree that short alliterative lays on historical or legendary themes circulated among the Germanic-speaking peoples from an early period, but concerning the exact nature of these lays we can say little. Of surviving poems, perhaps the fragmentary Old High German 'Hildebrandslied' and the fragmentary Old English 'Battle of Finnsburh' are closest to the ancestral type.*
>
> If most scholars agree with that still, the present paper differs from their views; and in the course of it I examine how such views may have come to be formed, and why I think they should be abandoned.[2]

When writing the two sentences that Stanley here singles out for attention, I had rather hoped that their hedging rhetoric would disarm prospective critics. Note the pusillanimous use of the phrase 'most scholars agree', without any names being named; the deliberate vagueness of the phrase 'from an early period'; my concession that 'we can say little' on this topic, after which I say little; and the qualifying adverb 'perhaps', which provides an escape route by which an academic writer can weasel his way out of any tight spot. Certainly in the nineteenth century, the timely use of a 'vielleicht' must have averted many a duel and spared many a good young man from destruction.

So even though I am unsure why I was quoted on this occasion except to provide a platform from which Stanley's horse could be given its thrashing, his ensuing analysis of *Finnsburh* and its unique position in Old English literature is full of insight. My own views are not further addressed. That is a fact for which I am thankful, since there is more than one passage in that chapter that merited a hiding but got off free.

I remain curious, however, as to why Stanley takes the phrase 'heretical notions' (which he rightly attributes to me) as referring to what I have to say (or do not say) about the genre of the 'heroic lay'. There is a misunderstanding here. What I meant to refer to when using that phrase, elsewhere on that page, was my attempt, throughout the rest of that chapter, to make a point that I continue to make in the present book as well. This claim, made with particular reference to *Beowulf*, *Waldere*, and *The Battle of Finnsburh*, is that 'much in these poems that lacks intellectual or stylistic coherence when read in the context of Bede's or Alcuin's mental world becomes transparently clear when set in relation to a native tradition of narrative verse'.[3] In 1983, I argued (referring to *Beowulf*, but

[2] E. G. Stanley, 'The Germanic "Heroic Lay" of Finnesburg', in his volume *A Collection of Papers with Emphasis on Old English Literature* (Toronto, 1987), pp. 281–97 (p. 281, with my italics so as to set off one voice from the other).

[3] I take the liberty of quoting my own words from 'Editing *Beowulf*: What Can Study of the Ballads Tell Us?', *Oral Tradition*, 9 (1994), 440–67 (p. 441).

Finnsburh would have served just as well) that 'Rather than ignore the native traditions that made such a poem possible, we would do well to respect them as the primary source of the excellence of this noble work of human imagination'.[4]

The perspective that I advocate in these passages has recently received a measure of support from the distinguished Anglo-Saxonist Fred C. Robinson. Concluding his chapter on 'Secular Poetry' for the 2001 *Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature*, Robinson writes as follows concerning the explosion of interest in the Christian themes and sources of Old English literature that began in the 1950s:

> This was clearly a positive development in Anglo-Saxon studies, and much good has come of it. But sometimes the Christian dimension of Old English literature seems to have been stressed almost to the exclusion of any other elements, especially of the native Germanic features of that corpus. Scholars and students seemed to lose sight at times of what a deeply retrospective strain marks the poetry of the Anglo-Saxons, who seemed to cling persistently to their history and their cultural identity. This survey of the secular poetry of the Anglo-Saxons serves to remind us of how important a part of the unique character of Old English poetry is the strong historical sense which keeps the people of early England in constant touch with their Germanic past and in full awareness of their cultural identity.[5]

In 1983, when I spoke of my approach to *Beowulf* and other works of Old English heroic poetry as verging on 'heresy', what I meant to do was to call attention to the fact that I was standing apart from the critical hegemony to which Robinson alludes. I did so in an effort to explore the native roots of what some readers consider to be the main strengths of that poetry. The period in question (*c.* 1972–82) was one when young scholars entering the profession were bound to be influenced by the writings of D. W. Robertson, Jr. It was a time when learned scholar-critics were publishing study after study that emphasized Latinate, patristic models and, in particular, orthodox Augustinian sources for what they considered to be the main strengths of Old English poetry, including *Beowulf*. That was the mighty beam against which I was exerting a small push, not in hopes that any grand house of the intellect would teeter, but so as to ensure that some side entry, at least, would be kept available for other approaches.

As for the Germanic 'heroic lay' and its exact nature, I had little to say about that topic then and have even less to say about it now, twenty-three years later. My confidence in the explanatory power of the concept of 'Germanic tradition' has eroded a good deal, in keeping with a scholarly trend towards a greater appreciation of 'creative ethnicity' and 'the invention of tradition'. Of course I do not wish (nor have I ever wished) to revive the antiquated notion that a fluently composed

[4] *Beowulf: The Poem and its Tradition*, p. 65.

[5] Fred C. Robinson, 'Secular Poetry', in Pulsiano and Treharne, pp. 281–95 (p. 294).

epic poem like *Beowulf* could have been stitched together out of a handful of heroic lays. That horse will indeed no longer run.

So even though some differences of emphasis can be discerned between Stanley's approach and mine, I have no desire to cross swords regarding what is not known about prehistory. Indeed, I am happy to be corrected by the spirit of his remarks. If I were to rewrite that offending passage, the first thing I would do would be to delete the phrase 'short alliterative lays', for it hints that we have real knowledge about prehistoric modes of verse. The more neutral phrase 'short poems or songs' would be more apt. For the same reason, the generic term 'epic', with its classical associations, may be found less useful than 'long poem'. Moreover, when speaking of the persons who actually composed Old English verse and who may have performed it aloud (the flesh-and-blood tribe of Cædmon, that is, as opposed to the 'Widsiths' who are entirely the creatures of imagination), I would replace the noun 'scop' with the more neutral one 'poet' or, if it seemed justified, 'singer'. While 'scop' is a word that is *echt germanisch*, it seems to have reached retirement age except for special purposes.

As for more substantive issues, my view of *Finnsburh* has not changed appreciably over time. I am still persuaded by evidence indicating that the early Germanic peoples of northern Europe cultivated poems or songs of some kind. On the basis of comparative evidence drawn from observation of other tribal societies past and present, it would seem highly improbable that they did not. To judge from comments made by their enemies and admirers the Romans, some of those poems or songs dramatized incidents drawn from their own legendary history. It is natural to think that such works were composed in the alliterative verse form that was the common property of the Germanic-speaking peoples during historical times — a verse form that was obviously conducive to composition by formula and set theme — but that conclusion must remain in the realm of inference rather than fact. As for *Finnsburh*, though I would not go as far as Alan Bliss (and others) have done and and call it 'a fragment of the kind of short heroic poem known as a "lay"',[6] I continue to see it as a poem composed on a Germanic legendary theme, in an alliterative verse form, in stylized formulaic language, at less than Beowulfian length. Read thus, *The Battle of Finnsburh* may strike modern readers as an apt entry point for discussion of the native roots of the Old English heroic tradition, including the long poems that, as splashy display items, represented a dilation and extension of shorter forms. Perhaps there the matter may rest for now.

[6] J. R. R. Tolkien, *Finn and Hengest: The Fragment and the Episode*, ed. by Alan Bliss (London, 1982), p. 2.

Chapter 5

Maldon and Mythopoesis

How are we to read *The Battle of Maldon*?

A thousand years after the battle that this poem commemorates was fought, historians and literary scholars are no nearer consensus on this issue than ever, and for good reasons. Like most Old English verse, the poem does not explain itself. Long before twentieth-century theorists announced, with some satisfaction, the death of the author, the unknown author of *Maldon* was indeed quite dead, having left no trace of his identity or his reasons for composing this work other than what can be inferred from the text.[1] Mutilated by the chances of manuscript transmission, the poem in its present state consists of a single brightly lit narrative into which speeches are introduced. There is no introduction, no conclusions or aftermath. Absent are historical digressions, gnomic asides, elegiac passages, homiletic interludes — in short, almost all the involutions that add shadows to the complex art of *Beowulf*. Despite its tenth- or eleventh-century date, *Maldon* thus displays a form that scholars have often associated (whether rightly or wrongly) with their concept of the *urgermanisch* heroic lay, and for this reason it has appealed to readers who like to take their literature straight.[2]

[1] See in particular Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', and Michel Foucault, 'What Is an Author?'. The two essays, which were first published in 1966 and 1969 respectively, are printed in English translation in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. by David Lodge (London, 1988), pp. 167–72 and 197–210, respectively.

[2] Note for example the comments of Walter John Sedgefield, writing in the preface to his edition *The Battle of Maldon and Short Poems from the Saxon Chronicle* (Boston, 1904): 'Very striking is the absence of ornament from the *Battle of Maldon*; all is plain, blunt, stern. Yet this directness, this simplicity produce on the hearer or reader a deeper effect than mere verbosity would have done' (p. vii). W. P. Ker's admiration for the poem likewise derives in part from his

Taking Old English literature straight, however, is not as easy as may seem. Even in its brisk, somewhat brusque demeanor, the narrative of *Maldon* embodies complex messages. Like any historical fiction, it does ideological work that requires exegesis with reference to the tensions of the period when it was composed.

One way to read the *Maldon* story — not the only way, to be sure, but one that has the virtue of attempting to ascertain what work the poem has done in history — is as an example of mythopoesis in late Anglo-Saxon England. Whatever else it is, *The Battle of Maldon* is a myth-like story that tells implicitly of the origin of one of the notorious aspects of Anglo-Viking relations during the reign of King Æthelred the Unready (978–1016), namely the policy whereby the English paid large sums of money to waves of Viking raiders in the vain hope of stabilizing the realm. In splendid alliterative verse, the poem recounts a tale of defiance and loss that makes clear the sad necessity for this policy of buying the Vikings off.[3] Nor is this the end of the story. In much later time, during the clash of modern nation-states, *The Battle of Maldon* has come to represent something slightly different to a new set of readers, and a myth of suicidal devotion has grown up around it. This myth too has done ideological work in that it has served to justify sacrifice in a patriotic cause on the field of war. But more of this later myth later.

The thesis that the poem makes manifest the need for something resembling Æthelred's policy of accommodation, rather than serving as an implicit condemnation of this King's pusillanimity, poses a challenge to a critical consensus that has emerged over many years, and I shall have to argue it carefully if I am to cut through these habitual ways of reading.[4] First, though, I should clarify that the

appreciation of its direct style: 'The poem of Maldon, late as it is, has uttered the spirit and essence of Northern heroic literature and its reserved and simple story and its invincible profession of heroic faith': *Epic and Romance* (New York, 1908), p. 57.

[3] Since the earlier form of this chapter was published, this aspect of my argument has been taken up by Craig R. Davis, 'Cultural Historicity in *The Battle of Maldon*', *PQ,* 78 (1999), 151–69. Writing in general accord with my reading of the poem but with attention to its antecedents in the Anglo-Saxon heroic tradition, Davis approaches the poem 'both as a reflex of archaic tradition and as a tool of contemporary cultural action' — that is, as a work that adapts inherited forms to present purposes (p. 164). While he sees *Maldon* as a 'cultural relic' and a last gasp of the heroic tradition, I find it hard to discern the grounds for a devolutionary model of this kind (a point that is made at pp. 60–61 above).

[4] See for example R. W. V. Elliott, 'Byrhtnoth and Hildebrand: A Study in Heroic Technique', in *Studies in Old English Literature in Honor of Arthur G. Brodeur*, ed. by Stanley B. Greenfield (Eugene, 1963), pp. 53–70: 'Perhaps the poem is intended as a deliberate criticism of the policy of appeasement so characteristic of Æthelred's reign' (p. 69). J. E. Cross, 'Mainly on

thesis depends to some extent on a theory of the poem's approximate date; and it is offered within the context of recent research that, without rehabilitating Æthelred's reputation altogether, has shown the inadequacy of historical judgements that are based on an uncritical acceptance of some early sources. Although Simon Keynes has recently remarked that it is difficult to conceive of Æthelred 'outside the context of the myths that have developed around his name', Keynes's own research (as well as that of other scholars) has done much to make this statement no longer valid.[5] As for the question of dating, I should state my agreement with the conclusion that the poem is not a timeless piece of fiction, but rather raises issues that have a specific application to the reign of Æthelred.[6] According to the

Philology and the Interpretative Criticism of *Maldon*', in *Old English Studies in Honour of John C. Pope*, ed. by Robert B. Burlin and Edward B. Irving, Jr (Toronto, 1974), pp. 235–53, suggests that the poem, if composed during the reign of Æthelred, 'could be an indictment by implication of the policy of buying off the Danes', as well as a criticism of Englishmen who lacked loyalty during those troubled times (pp. 247–48). John Scattergood, 'The Battle of Maldon and History', in *Literature and Learning in Medieval and Renaissance England*, ed. by Scattergood (Dublin, 1984), pp. 11–24, argues more forcefully that the poem is 'essentially propagandist' in its hard line against accommodation with the Danes: 'The poet defines how, in his opinion, the Danes should be opposed. His attitude is clear: he believes in military opposition, a refusal to pay tribute, decisive leadership and a determination to see battles through to the end' (p. 22).

[5] Simon Keynes, 'The Declining Reputation of King Æthelred the Unready', in *Ethelred the Unready: Papers from the Millenary Conference*, ed. by David Hill, BAR, British Series, 59 (Oxford, 1978), pp. 227–53 (p. 229). See in addition Pauline Stafford, 'The Reign of Æthelred II, a Study in the Limitations on Royal Policy and Action', in ibid., pp. 15–37, and Keynes, 'A Framework for the Reign of King Æthelred', ch. 4 (pp. 154–231) of his *The Diplomas of King Æthelred 'The Unready' 978–1016* (Cambridge, 1980).

[6] Most early commentators accepted a date soon after the battle, some of them in the naive belief that the poem is an eyewitness record rather than a carefully crafted work of art. Bernhard ten Brink, *Geschichte der Englischen Litteratur*, 2 vols, 2nd edn (Strassburg, 1899), I, 114, for example, found the poem 'voll von dramatischem Leben und von jener Wahrheit, dis aus unmittelbarer Anschauung hervorgeht' (full of dramatic life and of the truth that derives from unmediated observation). More recently John McKinnell, 'On the Date of *The Battle of Maldon*', *Medium Ævum*, 44 (1975), 121–36, proposed a date of composition not earlier than *c.* 1020 on the grounds of the poet's use of the noun *eorl* as a title in the poem. His argument has been countered by (among others) Cecily Clark, 'On Dating *The Battle of Maldon*: Certain Evidence Reviewed', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 27 (1983), 1–22. Earl R. Anderson, '*The Battle of Maldon*: A Reappraisal of Possible Sources, Date, and Theme', in *Modes of Interpretation in Old English Literature*, ed. by Phyllis R. Brown, Georgia Ronan Crampton, and Fred C. Robinson (Toronto, 1986), pp. 247–72, while finding McKinnell's linguistic test 'inconclusive', proposes a date as late as the reign of Edward the Confessor (1042–65) on the basis of possible literary

poem's most able editor, there is no good linguistic, literary, or historical reason to favour a date much later than the battle, and Nicholas Brooks has provided a fresh argument for reading the poem in the context of Anglo-Saxon military service in the 990s.[7]

Adding to the weight of arguments for dating *Maldon* soon after the battle is the nature of the poem's three references to Æthelred. The first of these is Byrhtnoth's proud declaration that Æthelred is his *ealdor* 'lord' (53b) in the passage where he defies the unnamed Viking messenger.[8] The second and third references occur in that part of the poem where Byrhtnoth is first pierced through by a Viking spear and then, after additional wounds, falls dead on the field of battle. Here Byrhtnoth is specified to be Æthelred's *þegen* 'thegn' (151b), then his *eorl* 'ealdorman' (203a). Some readers, influenced by the knowledge of Æthelred's ill reputation that they have gained from sources outside the poem, have concluded that these references to the King are ironic. According to this view, Byrhtnoth's boast of being Æthelred's thegn would have struck an audience of Anglo-Saxons as an almost comically empty gesture, given Æthelred's well-known ineffectiveness as king. This view leads to a theory of dating the poem long enough after the battle for Æthelred's ill reputation to have become established.[9] If the references

influence on the poem. He grants that this evidence is 'not really conclusive either', however (p. 249). Scattergood, 'Battle of Maldon and History', p. 16, argues for an early date on the basis of the poem's definition of period specific issues: '[The poem] seems to me to belong to a distinctively historical context because it deals with problems which were relevant to Englishmen in the reign of Æthelred — three problems in particular: what is it that makes a good leader, especially a good war-leader; and whether it is better to confront the Vikings with military force or to pay them tribute; and whether it is better to fight battles through to the bitter end and risk one's life or to ensure safety by flight.' W. G. Busse and R. Holtei, '*The Battle of Maldon*: A Historical, Heroic and Political Poem', *Neoph*, 65 (1981), 614–21, write in a similar vein of how *Maldon* illustrates 'the mastering of contemporary problems by means of literature' (p. 619). For them the key issue raised in the poem is that of heroic resistance versus flight, for this issue related to real-life choices made by members of the class of thegns during Æthelred's reign.

[7] *The Battle of Maldon AD 991*, ed. by Donald Scragg (Oxford, 1991), p. 32 (henceforth abbreviated 'Scragg 1991'). Nicholas Brooks, 'Weapons and Armour', in Scragg 1991, pp. 208–19.

[8] Quotations of the text of the poem in the present chapter are drawn from *The Battle of Maldon*, ed. by D. G. Scragg (Manchester, 1981), henceforth abbreviated 'Scragg 1981'. Translations are my own unless indicated otherwise.

[9] Fred C. Robinson, 'Some Aspects of the *Maldon* Poet's Artistry', *JEGP*, 75 (1976), 25–40, claims that 'Each of the poet's allusions to Ethelred the Unready carries a rich and powerful irony if we can assume that the poem was composed long enough after the battle for the audience to know that the king had proved unworthy of the sacrifices that were made in his name' (p. 28).

to Æthelred are taken as ironic, it follows that Byrhtnoth is portrayed as uttering his great words of defiance, then giving up his life, in what we know to be an act of devotion to a worthless king. While this way of reading the poem may have a certain appeal, to the disenchanted at any rate, it requires that we read two of the most memorable and moving passages of the poem with an attitude of superior detachment.[10] The perspective that is required here makes it difficult to see Byrhtnoth's death as having exemplary force as a display of courage in a high cause. My alternative suggestion is that Æthelred is invoked as a figure of respected kingship, no more and no less, and the narrator makes a point of showing that Byrhtnoth, as one of his loyal thegns, takes pride in serving him.[11] Æthelred's ill reputation, after all, largely postdated the Maldon campaign. He was no more than twenty-five years old at this time and may have been somewhat younger. The realm was wealthy and stable, and the miseries that were to afflict it later could by no means have been foreseen. Æthelred was not to earn his sarcastic epithet *Unræd* 'Ill-Counsel' until the twelfth century, as far as one can tell — the earliest recorded reference to it is by Walter Map, writing in the 1180s[12] — and the entries in the CDE versions of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* that lament the disastrous course of events during his reign were likewise composed retrospectively sometime in the first half of the eleventh century, not contemporaneously with the events described.[13] Regardless of their date, these entries do not necessarily reflect a sentiment that was felt universally at any time.

[10] I use the term in the general sense in which H. Marshall Leicester, Jr, employs it in *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley, 1990). Chaucer's ironic stance in a disenchanted world stands in sharp contrast to the narrator's stance in any Old English literature that has survived.

[11] S. A. J. Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London, 1982), states this position yet more emphatically: 'Byrhtnoth testifies to his oneness with his people, with his land, with his lord the king; he witnesses to his Christian faith in defiance of heathendom and, dying, commends his soul to God. His men in turn testify to their oneness with him and thereby witness to their participation in the same total integrity of secular and spiritual values' (p. 519).

[12] Keynes, 'Declining Reputation', p. 240.

[13] This wide span of time represents the dating of Janet M. Bately, 'The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*', in Scragg 1991, pp. 37–50 (p. 42). Eric John, 'War and Society in the Tenth Century: The Maldon Campaign', *TRHS*, 5th series, 27 (1977), 173–95, notes that the CDE annals of the *Chronicle* represent a retrospective account, 'written when defeat had become a habit' (p. 184). Keynes, 'Declining Reputation', pp. 229–32, argues for the probability that these annals date from the period 1016–23.

The three references to Æthelred are significant, for they transform what might otherwise seem a merely local encounter into an issue of national importance. As George Clark has remarked, 'The narrator portrays Byrhtnoth as the defender and spokesman of England, not as a provincial earl of Essex.'[14] The references have a proud ring to them, if I am not mistaken, for invocations of his king, his homeland, and the English people make it clear what Byrhtnoth is fighting for. They fit what seems to be an attempt to represent the troops under Byrhtnoth's command as a microcosm of the English people. Among the warriors are men with ties to many geographical locales besides Essex, men whose names seem to indicate Scandinavian as well as English descent, and members of various social classes ranging from the upper nobility to the rank of ordinary freemen.[15] The poet presents Byrhtnoth as the lynchpin of a five-part hierarchy of command that links the English *fyrd* 'general levies', the *heorð-geneatas* 'elite troops', Byrhtnoth as a representative of the high aristocracy, Æthelred as King of England, and Christ as lord of hosts.[16] As field commander of the English troops, Byrhtnoth is portrayed as an experienced, forceful leader who responds to the Viking threat with a vigour of which his young king would have approved, though also with a touch of arrogance that goes beyond the limits of prudence.

To return to the central issue of *Maldon* as an example of mythopoesis, what I mean to suggest is that the poem is not just a celebration of English heroism on the occasion of Byrhtnoth's death. The poem can be read as an attempt to conceptualize major social issues relating to Æthelred's reign and to resolve them, or at least hang them in suspension, in the form of a story. In particular, the first part of the narrative is oriented around a pressing pragmatic question. How should the English nation respond to the threat posed by an aggressive army of Vikings: by offering fight or tribute? An answer to this question is then posed not discursively, but rather in the form of a myth.

[14] George Clark, '*The Battle of Maldon*: A Heroic Poem', *Speculum*, 43 (1968), 52–71 (p. 58).

[15] On the idea of the microcosm, see N. F. Blake, 'The Battle of Maldon', *Neoph*, 49 (1965), 332–45 (at p. 338). Margaret A. L. Locherbie-Cameron, 'The Men Named in the Poem', in Scragg 1991, pp. 238–49, summarizes what information is known about the individuals whom the poet mentions by name.

[16] A. N. Doane, 'Legend, History and Artifice in *The Battle of Maldon*', *Viator*, 9 (1978), 39–66 (at pp. 54–55). While Doane sees the relationship between the men who figure in the poem and Christ in hierarchical terms, other readers have examined this relationship in terms of allegory. See Scragg 1981, references on p. 35, and note Richard Hillman, 'Defeat and Victory in *The Battle of Maldon*: The Christian Resonances Reconsidered', *English Studies in Canada*, 11 (1985), 385–95.

Trauma and Mythogenesis

Since the term myth means different things to different people, I should make clear how I am using it. By a myth, I mean a story, well known among a people or a group, that tells about larger-than-life figures from the recent or distant past in such a way as to confirm or authorize one or more essential ideas pertaining to that group's culture. A myth in this sense is not a term for someone else's false belief, nor is it a sacred narrative. On the contrary, it is regarded as a true account of events, true in its conformity to a set of accepted ideas concerning the way that the world is shaped and has unfolded in time.[17] The myth is underpinned by a quasi-logical structure that is based on a distinction between time past and time present, events *in illo tempore* and *in hoc tempore*. 'Because event *A* happened in former times', the myth implicitly affirms, 'we do (or think, or experience) *B* today.'[18]

[17] My approach to the mythic aspect of *Maldon* can be distinguished from that of D. G. Scragg, '*The Battle of Maldon*: Fact or Fiction?', in *The Battle of Maldon, Fiction and Fact*, ed. by Janet Cooper (London, 1993), pp. 19–31. Scragg sets out to answer the question 'What in the poem is factual, and what is fictive?'. Taking issue with naive views of the poem as being reliable as a historical source, Scragg concludes that *Maldon* is 'a work of fiction — fictional because such facts as it reports are given in a way that forces the audience to see them in a particular light'. In this way the poem succeeds at 'manipulation of audience response' (p. 23). Working along lines closer to mine, Doane, 'Legend, History and Artifice', pp. 42–43, finds some anachronism in the need to draw sharp distinctions between 'fact' and 'fiction': 'What strikes one immediately about the period in question is that historical and fictive narrative are not markedly distinct. Poetry, history, encomium, hagiography tend to merge into a single all-pervasive method of narrative which I will call "legendary". The legendary method is on its surface historical, and all narrative claims to be historical, since fiction has little status [. . .]. In such writing historical events must conform to established ideological, typological, anagogical ways of looking at them.' In three different ways, what Scragg, Doane, and I are trying to do is to come to grips with the way that the 'truth value' of *Maldon* can be distinguished from its factual content. Scragg describes the poem in terms of an act of manipulation; Doane sees it as conforming to pre-existing narrative patterns; and I see it as expressive of an emergent myth that arose in response to particular historical events. The three perspectives do not need to be argued against one another, for they are complementary.

[18] An account of the wide range of meanings of the term 'myth' is offered by Claire R. Farrer, 'Myth', in *Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, pp. 575–81. Like many current scholars, Farrar stresses the presentness of myth as well as its adaptability. Various essays defining myth and exploring its functions are anthologized in *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*, ed. by Alan Dundes (Berkeley, 1984). Most of these studies are written from an anthropological perspective and are concerned with the role of living myths (sacred narratives) in primary oral cultures. The role of mythmaking in the literature or mass media of complex societies is another question, one that has

Myths in this sense are rather more common than most people think. In Great Britain, for example, one can speak of the myth of Arthur, which served to justify imperial ambitions both in the fourteenth century and in the nineteenth, or the myth of Robin Hood, which for seven centuries has confirmed popular animosity directed against institutional corruption in Church and state. In the United States one can speak of the myth of George Washington, which justifies a certain patriarchal structure of governance, or the myth of John Henry and the stream drill, which gives narrative form to one of the chief issues of late industrialism, namely the plight of manual labourers (blacks in particular) who have been made redundant by automation. Often though not always, the subjects of myth are historical persons, and the mythopoeic impulse takes the form of auxesis. The myth magnifies real or imagined people or events into something grand, tragic, or inspiring, and it turns them into the central icons and focal points of stories that, built on archetypal patterns and believed in as articles of faith, serve to explain a current reality or validate a people's customary attitudes, habits, or beliefs.

Myths of this kind need not be hundreds of years in the making. They can develop surprisingly quickly, depending on the ideological climate of the moment and a people's appetite or need for them. A sudden death or spectacular killing, especially at a time of crisis, can provide the kernel from which they spring. Martyrdom can be one key element in the mythopoeic process, for violence, myth, and the sacred are sometimes grimly allied in the process by which ordinary reality is transformed into something greater than itself.[19] To refer again to North American history, one wonders if such heroes of the popular imagination as President Abraham Lincoln (shot dead in 1865), the notorious outlaw Jesse James (shot dead in 1882), the actor James Dean (died in an automobile accident, 1955), the actress and sex symbol Marilyn Monroe (died as an apparent suicide, 1962), President John F. Kennedy (shot dead in 1963), or the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr (shot dead in 1968) could have achieved quasi-mythic status so readily if each of them had not met with

not been dealt with systematically as yet, to my knowledge. The best case study of such mythmaking with which I am familiar is Bruce Rosenberg, *Custer and the Epic of Defeat* (University Park, 1974); see especially pp. 209–16 for a discussion of *The Battle of Maldon* in terms of mythic patterning. George Clark, 'Maldon: History, Poetry, and Truth', in *De Gustibus: Essays for Alain Renoir*, ed. by John Miles Foley (New York, 1992), pp. 66–84, while never using the word or concept 'myth', writes about *Maldon* in a somewhat comparable vein. In his view, the poem 'epitomizes a history of Anglo-Saxon England's defeat' (pp. 74–75); it is 'a poetic idea of an age' (p. 83).

[19] I refer here in a general way to claims made by René Girard in *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. by Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, 1977; first published as *La violence et le sacré*, 1972).

a sensational death.[20] In the United Kingdom, the sudden and traumatic death of Lady Diana Spencer in an automobile accident in Paris in 1997 'produced unprecedented expressions of public mourning, testifying to her enormous hold on the British national pysche'.[21] In one grief-stricken day, the Princess of Wales was transformed into a revered victim and, thanks to her work for social causes that were only then publicized widely, a beloved teacher and model for the young.

At work in the popular response to such traumatic events is what the distinguished medievalist historian C. Stephen Jaeger has called the 'cult of charisma'. This cult is centred on prominent persons — on master teachers, in those eleventh-century educational settings that are Jaeger's particular concern — whose lessons for the living are inseparable from their unique physical presence. Through dreadful suffering, the unique physical presence of martyred saints and similarly revered leaders is made most palpable to others:

> The effect of the master is deepest and most abiding when the charismatic body is tortured, mutilated, destroyed. The love of the living master may be a strong inducement to live according to his model; his martyrdom is stronger yet. The elegance of Socrates' death and the agony of Christ's had equally wrenching impacts on their followers. These masters' deaths by violence established their cult as much as did their teaching. The tragic demise in each case laid foundations deep in the souls of the disciples, cemented them in place with an emotional force beyond tragedy, a force far more lasting than anything as comparatively trivial as knowledge and understanding.[22]

In the turbulence of late tenth-century England, the killing of Byrhtnoth at Maldon in AD 991 must have had an effect on his followers and admirers that was just as wrenching, given the different circumstances of that day, as the sudden death of celebrated persons has been in other times and places. Through his graphically depicted death on the field of battle, as articulated in the highly dramatic narrative poem *The Battle of Maldon*, a man who was otherwise no more than a highly regarded ealdorman and a leading donor to the Church was converted into a figure of charisma.

[20] Rosenberg, *Custer and the Epic of Defeat*, pp. 271–78, discusses popular mythmaking with regard to the deaths of President Lincoln and President Kennedy. Rosenberg shows how the mythmaking process can begin 'within days, perhaps hours of the event' (p. 269).

[21] *Encyclopædia Britannica* on-line edition (2004), s.v. 'Diana, Princess of Wales'.

[22] C. Stephen Jaeger, *The Envy of Angels: Cathedral Schools and Social Ideals in Medieval Europe, 950–1200* (Philadelphia, 1994), p. 8. This book was of course unknown to me when I wrote the original version of the present chapter. I include notice of it here because Jaeger's account of what is involved in charismatic leadership seems to me to establish better ground for understanding such poems as *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon* than was available to me at that time.

It is hard today to imagine the shock-waves that Byrhtnoth's death must have touched off among his contemporaries in late tenth-century England. In the preceding decades, ever since the battle that had been fought at Brunanburh in 937 had confirmed the rule of the West Saxon kings over what was now a united England,[23] the new nation had seen power grow into confidence. In many ways England had become the envy of Europe in its efficient administration, which was based on an amalgam of English and Anglo-Danish power. Beginning with the traumatic Viking campaign of 991, the nation was thrust into a new era of insecurity, wracked by renewed invasions and torn by internal divisions. In the opinion of Eric John, the battle at Maldon was probably no insignificant clash, as sometimes has been thought, but rather occurred at a moment of intense crisis and may have been a turning point in the history of those times.[24]

The poem that we know as *The Battle of Maldon* marks an early stage in the emergence of a myth that made Byrhtnoth's death the centrepiece of a tale of dramatic reversal in England's fortunes. In a series of scenes that inscribe themselves on one's imagination, the poem displays the courage of Byrhtnoth as an uncompromisingly hawkish leader, excoriates the breach of faith shown by those other warriors who fled the battle, and celebrates the heroic loyalty of the men who stood firm after their leader's death, even at the cost of their own lives.

To Give Tribute or Not? That Was the Question

The issue on which the battle is imagined to hinge is highlighted early on. Should the English accept the terms of peace that a Viking messenger has offered them,

[23] This at any rate is the 'myth of Brunanburh' that is embodied in the *Chronicle* poem *sub anno* 937. We will never know what the historical reality was that inspired that celebratory piece.

[24] John, 'War and Society', pp. 173 and 190, respectively. In an article published in the same volume as the original version of the present chapter, John Hill revives the notion that the battle at Maldon represented 'an English defeat of no particular military consequence', despite its financial consequences: see his 'Transcendental Loyalty in *The Battle of Maldon*', *Mediaevalia*, 17 (1994 for 1991), 67–88 (p. 82; cf. p. 80). Hill is thus able to present the stand of the loyal retainers at *Maldon* as 'an astonishing form of loyalty unto death' (p. 77), a collective 'apotheosis' that is 'transcendent' in its 'raising loyalty to a level beyond the commonsensical or the easily understandable' (p. 80). What Hill calls the 'evangelical dimension' of the poem derives in part, in his view, from the fact that the outcome of the battle meant so little. While there is much in Hill's analysis that I admire, I am inclined to accept John's view that Byrhtnoth's defeat did indeed have serious consequences.

by which they are to pay an unspecified amount of money as tribute, or should they refuse those terms and offer battle?[25] The poet presents us with a Byrhtnoth whose emphatic response to that question, backed by the imagined shouts of his troops, is to reject any negotiation with the Vikings whatsoever:

> Gehyrst þu, sælida, hwæt þis folc segeð?
> Hi willað eow to gafole garas syllan,
> ættrynne ord and ealde swurd,
> þa heregeatu þe eow æt hilde ne deah.
> Brimmanna boda, abeod eft ongean,
> sege þinum leodum miccle laþre spell,
> þæt her stynt unforcuð eorl mid his werode,
> þe wile gealgean eþel þysne,
> Æþelredes eard, ealdres mines
> folc and foldan. (45–54a)

> (Do you hear, seafarer, what this army is saying? They want to give you spears as tribute, deadly spearpoints and time-tested swords, a payment of war-gear that will do you no good in battle. Messenger of the Vikings, report back to your people; tell a much less welcome tale, that here stands with his warriors an ealdorman of untainted reputation, one who intends to defend this homeland, its people and its turf, the kingdom of Æthelred, my lord.)

In a voice laced with irony, Byrhtnoth declares that his troops will indeed offer gifts — of weapons, points first.[26] He himself, a nobleman who has never been disgraced (*unforcuð eorl*, 51), will stand firm in defence of the land and its king. Indeed, he goes on to say, he would find it shameful (*heanlic*, 55b) if his northern guests were to return home unchallenged after they had gone to the trouble of coming so far. Before the English pay tribute, the play of war (*guðplega*, 61a) will 'reconcile' (*geseman*, 60b) the two opposing parties.

[25] M. R. Godden, 'Money, Power, and Morality in Late Anglo-Saxon England', *ASE*, 19 (1990), 41–65, calls attention to the ambiguity of the superlative adjective *ricost* which the Viking messenger uses to characterize Byrhtnoth in line 36. 'When the Viking messenger addresses Byrhtnoth as "you who are *ricost* here", the primary or surface sense is probably "in supreme authority", but since the speech is a demand for tribute or ransom it is difficult to avoid the suspicion of a pun on the newer meaning of *ricost*, "most wealthy"' (p. 52). The passage thus illustrates the alliance of power and wealth that Godden sees as a signature element of the later Anglo-Saxon period.

[26] Both Edward B. Irving, Jr, 'The Heroic Style in *The Battle of Maldon*', *SPh*, 58 (1961), 457–67 (at pp. 460–61), and Earl R. Anderson, 'Flyting in the *Battle of Maldon*', *NM*, 71 (1970), 197–202, emphasize the masterful irony that is achieved through verbal echoes in Byrhtnoth's speech to the Viking messenger.

As the annals of the composite work known as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* make clear, the choice that is dramatized in this fictional exchange between Byrhtnoth and the Viking messenger was one that the English faced repeatedly during the years from 991 to 1013. Their decision, time and again, was to pay tribute: £10,000 in 991, £16,000 in 994, £24,000 in 1002, £36,000 in 1007, £48,000 in 1012, and an undisclosed sum in 1013.[27] Perhaps these payments were craven, as used to be assumed. Perhaps, at first, they were one part of a strategy whereby King Æthelred gave material aid to Olaf Tryggvason and other Norwegian Vikings who were ravaging England, bargaining perhaps that those Vikings, once they had accepted the Christian faith and this alliance, would help guard England against the ascendant power of Swein Forkbeard's Denmark.[28] In either event, the results were depressingly the same. No matter what payments were made, no lasting peace emerged. The harrying continued, growing worse as time went on, until eventually, in 1013–14, Swein drove Æthelred into exile and, within another two years, Swein's son Cnut assimilated England into a Danish empire that spanned the North Sea.

The poem thus foregrounds the key issue of these turbulent years before the fall of Æthelred. Buy the peace, or fight? Trust, even if uneasily, in the *pax nordica* that the Vikings were proposing, or hold out defiantly against them?

The entries for the year 991 in the CDE versions of the *Chronicle* make clear that the death of Byrhtnoth at Maldon was the key factor in persuading the English to follow the less resolute of these courses:

> Her wæs Gypeswic gehergod, ond æfter þon swiðe raðe wæs Brihtnoð ealdorman ofslegen æt Mældune, ond on þam geare man gerædde þæt man geald ærest gafol Denescum mannum for ðam miclan brogan þe hi worhton be ðam sæ riman, þæt wæs ærest x ðusend punda. Þene ræd gerædde ærest Syric arcebisceop.[29]
>
> (In this year Ipswich was ravaged, and very soon afterwards Ealdorman Byrhtnoth was killed at Maldon. And in this year it was decided that tribute should first be paid to the Danes because of the great terror they wrought along the coast. This first payment was £10,000. It was Archbishop Sigeric who first advised this course.)

[27] Simon Keynes, 'The Historical Context of the Battle of Maldon', in Scragg 1991, pp. 81–113 (at p. 100), summarizes these payments and assesses their significance in the overall pattern of Anglo-Viking relations during this period.

[28] This argument is made by Theodore M. Andersson, 'The Viking Policy of Æthelred the Unready', *Scandinavian Studies*, 59 (1987), 284–95.

[29] Scragg 1991, p. 38.

In typical fashion, the annalist links the two events by parataxis alone: Byrhtnoth was slain, and a decision was made to offer the Vikings tribute. The causative element here is left understood. As happens frequently in oral narrative as well as in annalistic writing of this kind, the juxtaposition, in sequential order, of two related elements is enough to imply the workings of causality. Byrhtnoth was the third-ranking nobleman in the realm. His inability to defeat the Viking force in a pitched battle seems to have had such a strong psychological impact on the English that they decided to begin paying tribute. According to the myth, the sums of money paid in subsequent years have this first payment as their precedent. They are extensions, in similar circumstances, of the same process of thought that led Archbishop Sigeric and other leading advisors to urge accommodation with the Viking force to forestall further damage. Whether or not the battle fought at Maldon was the key event that initiated this reversal of fortune, it was believed to be so, as is made evident by the annalist's threefold repetition of the adverb *ærest* 'for the first time', even though these payments were not in fact the first ones offered by the English.[30]

Maldon *Compared with Other Accounts of the Battle*

To judge from the number of sources that testify to Byrhtnoth's death, a mythopoeic impulse was at work soon after that event and did not play itself out until late in the twelfth century, as numerous writers mulled over the themes of defiance and loss and worked out their significance in various ways.[31]

The entries in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* provide evidence that parallel and conflicting accounts of what happened at Maldon were in circulation not long after the battle was fought. Versions CDE state curtly that Ipswich was harried, that Byrhtnoth was slain at Maldon, and that £10,000 in tribute was paid. Version A, the Parker Chronicle, specifies that Folkestone, Sandwich, and Ipswich were all harried, that it was Anlaf (Olaf Tryggvason) who led the Vikings, that he commanded ninety-three ships, that peace was made with him, and that Æthelred stood sponsor to him at his confirmation; and it specifies that all this took place

[30] Payments were made in 865 and, apparently, in 872 and 876, as is noted by Cross, 'Mainly on Philology', p. 241. Keynes, *Diplomas of King Æthelred*, p. 202 n. 181, notes that in the earlier part of the tenth century, King Eadred allotted £16,000 'to be used for the good of his people, should they need to purchase relief from hunger and from the heathen army'.

[31] The sources are edited and translated with admirable clarity in Scragg 1991, pp. 1–78.

in 992, not 991. No mention is made of tribute. The A annalist thus departs from CDE in his more favourable portrait of the truce and in his conflation of events that in CDE are divided between 991 (the battle at Maldon) and 994 (additional harrying and Olaf's confirmation). In the words of David Dumville, the A version is 'a retrospective annal, written after the fame of the battle of Maldon (991) had spread and contaminated the recollection of other encounters'.[32] In other words, at play in this account is a mythopoeic impulse that consolidated the events of history into a unified narrative. Significantly, this narrative is not hostile to Æthelred. In addition, its effect is to cast the best light possible on the events of 991–94 from the perspective of the English leadership. Evidently what is at work here is not just the contamination of social memory, but rather the politically motivated shaping of it.

A different development of the myth is evident in the Latin *Life of St Oswald*, attributed to Byrhtferth of Ramsey and probably written during the years 997–1005.[33] Obvious in this account are the workings of hyperbole. The campaign now encompasses the whole of southern England, as the Vikings are said to have begun their harrying in the west, in Devon, before moving east to Essex. Much is made of Byrhtnoth's large stature and commanding appearance: he stands tall above the rest, with swan-white hair. Similarly impressive is the number of men said to be involved in the battle, 'for an infinite number of them and us fell'. The English warriors flee after Byrhtnoth's fall, but the Danes' victory is a pyrrhic one, for they suffer losses so great that 'they were scarcely able to man their ships'. No mention is made either of tribute or of the courage of retainers who chose to stand firm in the midst of the general flight. Curiously, however, a heroic theme similar to what we find in the last half of *The Battle of Maldon* occurs in the context of the Devonshire battle. In this conflict 'one of our men, a valiant soldier called Stremwold, was killed along with several others who chose to end their lives by death in battle rather than to live on in shame' ('qui bellica morte magis elegerunt uitam finire quam ignobiliter uiuere'). It is not clear what the shame of these men would have been if they had chosen to live on, for the men of Devon, unlike those of Essex, are said to have won their battle. One wonders if lost poems comparable to *The Battle of Maldon* celebrated the deeds of Stremwold and his companions, or if the theme of heroic resistance to the Vikings was displaced from

[32] David N. Dumville, *Wessex and England from Alfred to Edgar* (Woodbridge, 1992), p. 59.

[33] For the dating of the *Life*, see Michael Lapidge, 'The *Life of St Oswald*', in Scragg 1991, pp. 51–58 (at p. 51). My quotations are from pp. 51–55 of this chapter (Lapidge's translations).

the warriors in Essex to their Devonshire counterparts, or vice versa. In any event, the theme was in the air.

Post-Conquest accounts, based chiefly on the information given in the *Chronicle* as supplemented by knowledge of the treaty known as II Æthelred, which dates from 991 or 994, show the emergence of a canonical version of what happened in 991. The twelfth-century Anglo-Norman historians John of Worcester, Henry of Huntingdon, and Symeon of Durham all repeat the information given in *Chronicle* versions CDE, stressing that tribute was given and that a great number fell either on both sides (John) or on the English side alone (Henry). By this time, Æthelred's unfortunate reputation was confirmed, and Henry accordingly adds the specific information that tribute was paid 'on the disastrous advice' ('consilio infausto') of Sigeric.[34] The attempt on the part of the A version of the *Chronicle* to whitewash these events is thereby turned firmly aside.

One other twelfth-century account, the *Liber Eliensis*, stands as an important witness to an independent tradition about Byrhtnoth and Maldon. This anonymous work may well draw on local legends current at Ely, the site of Byrhtnoth's tomb. Byrhtnoth and his widow were well remembered there on account of their benefactions to the monastery, and the *Liber Eliensis* uses the account of his death as a means of confirming the specific grants he made to Ely. It does this by way of a story of how the Abbot of Ely offered Byrhtnoth and his men generous hospitality when they were on their way to Maldon after having been rudely turned away from the rival house of Ramsey. As improbable as this story may seem, given its obvious bias for Ely, the *Ramsey Chronicle* confirms it in its essentials.[35] The tale may thus be based on actual events, though not necessarily on ones that occurred on the very eve of the battle in 991.

As one expects of a document of this kind, the *Liber Eliensis* includes ample praise of Byrhtnoth's courage, stature, and generosity, together with approving comments on his support of the tenth-century monastic reform. With slight hyperbole, it adds that Byrhtnoth was protector not only of his own men, but of all the leaders of the shires, who chose him as their lord on account of his great worth and faith. Just as Byrhtnoth is raised in stature, the battle of Maldon is amplified into a two-part campaign extending over a period of years. First, in 887, Byrhtnoth is said to have met a party of Vikings 'at the bridge over the water'. He

[34] Alan Kennedy, 'Byrhtnoth's Obits and Twelfth-Century Accounts of the Battle of Maldon', in Scragg 1991, pp. 59–78 (at p. 63).

[35] Kennedy, 'Byrhtnoth's Obits', pp. 63–70.

kills nearly all of them. Four years later, in 991, a Viking army returns to avenge this defeat and boldly challenges Byrhtnoth, who agrees to join battle against them with only a small force. This is the only account that specifies that Byrhtnoth was outnumbered at Maldon. Given the likelihood that a lord of his stature would have assembled a large force of men from the eastern counties before engaging a Viking army of this kind, this statement of his underdog status may be taken as mythic adornment rather than historical fact.[36] Similarly fanciful is the statement that the ensuing battle lasted fourteen days. The English are said to fight valiantly, inflicting great slaughter on their enemies, but the Vikings finally win, decapitating Byrhtnoth. The monks of Ely recover his torso and bring it back to the church for burial. No mention is made of three themes that figure prominently in *Maldon*: an attempt at extortion, the flight of cowardly retainers, and the heroic resistance of warriors after their leader's death.

In the main, the account in the *Liber Eliensis* is likely to have accorded with the narrative content of the textile hanging that Byrhtnoth's widow, Ælfflæd, gave to Ely in his memory. In the words of the *Liber*, this hanging, now lost, was 'embroidered and figured with the deeds of her husband' ('gestis viri sui intextam atque depictam').[37] If this embroidery was kept on display for long at Ely, the chronicler would scarcely have contradicted its important features. On the contrary, he would probably have made a point of including reference to the deeds that were figured prominently on that work of art. If we may draw natural inferences from the later, far more famous embroidery that goes by the name of the Bayeux tapestry and that highlights the violent death of King Harold Godwineson of England on the field of Hastings, the Ely hanging would have included among its featured scenes the moment of Byrhtnoth's death. Though surely of much smaller dimensions than the later Bayeux embroidery, the tapestry at Ely might have included such other incidents, mentioned in the *Liber*, as the skirmish at the bridge, the Viking army's landing near Maldon, Byrhtnoth's reception at Ely, the general melee, and the recovery of Byrhtnoth's body for burial. We are free to guess. In any event, like Byrhtnoth's tomb, the textile at Ely would have stood as

[36] Curiously, students of mine who have never read the *Liber Eliensis* have referred to Byrhtnoth as being outnumbered at Maldon. They have been surprised to discover that there is no basis for this idea in the poem, though it does surface from time to time in the modern critical literature. As Rosenberg notes (*Custer and the Epic of Defeat*, pp. 238 and 266–67), a mythopoeic impulse identifying Byrhtnoth as an underdog is still at work in the current era.

[37] Mildred Budny, 'The Byrhtnoth Tapestry or Embroidery', in Scragg 1991, pp. 263–78 (p. 263).

a striking visual reminder of that man. It would have done much, at least locally, to promote Byrhtnoth's charisma as a great warrior and a martyr for the faith.

The Battle of Maldon thus is noteworthy not only for its length and detail, as compared with these other sources, but also for its apparent independence from these accounts. It is a separate witness to the growth of a myth-like story focused on the battle fought in Essex in 991.[38] All we have of the poem is a fragment, and if its beginning and end had survived, its departures from these analogues might be less striking. Still, the physical evidence suggests that not much is lost.[39] What the fragment does include suggests that the poem had a pivotal place in the development of memories of Byrhtnoth's death into a myth that, among its other functions, accounts for the remarkable and shameful fact that the English nation was forced to pay for peace, time and time again, during the latter part of Æthelred's reign.

The Thematic Structure of the Poem

In a unified narrative, the poem as we have it arrays four main themes around the kernel element of Byrhtnoth's death, which is the *kairos* 'crucial moment' from which these elaborations must have sprung. While each of these themes plays a part in one or more of the analogues, only in this poem are they brought together in a seamless sequence. Leaving aside the initial lines that set the stage for action, the poem thus displays a five-part structure that can be summarized as follows:

1. *The debate about tribute* (lines 25–61). The poet foregrounds this issue and dramatizes it in the form of a superb exchange of words between Byrhtnoth and an unnamed Viking messenger. The Viking offers the English protection (*gebeorh*, 31a) and a truce (*grið*, 35b; *frið*, 39b) in exchange for an unspecified amount of treasure (*beagas*, 31a; *gafol*, 32b; *gold*, 34a; *feoh*, 39a; *sceattas*, 40a). The number of times treasure is named in these lines reflects its thematic importance in the narrative. Byrhtnoth responds to this offer with splendid disdain. Whether or not

[38] For a different view, see N. F. Blake, 'The Genesis of *The Battle of Maldon*', *ASE*, 7 (1978), 119–29. Blake's argument that the poem is best taken as 'a literary creation based entirely on the *Vita Oswaldi* and imagination' (p. 129) has not generally been accepted.

[39] Donald Scragg finds it 'tempting to assume, though it cannot be proved, that the poem was written on one such booklet [a quire of four double sheets], the outer sheet of which has been lost' (Scragg 1991, p. 16). This theory, admittedly speculative, would allow for a loss of not more than fifty or so lines at either end of the poem.

such an offer was made at Maldon in fact, the poet has reasons to include it in his dramatization of events. Everyone knew that tribute was paid after the battle was lost. By presenting Byrhtnoth and his men as scorning the path of accommodation, the poet is able to show what the alternative to payment was. By this means, the grievous English losses that ensue are presented as by no means an inevitable consequence of the Vikings' presence. Instead, they are the result of a decision regarding policy. In principle, the decision is bound to gain the audience's admiration, but its results are bitter indeed. The effect of the passage is thus complex. On the one hand, one cannot help but admire what might be called the chutzpah of the English host. The commanding rhetoric of Byrhtnoth's response almost compels readers to share in his choice, as I have observed on many occasions when teaching the poem to university students, who invariably delight in Byrhtnoth's defiant stance. On the other hand, the ensuing course of events is sobering, to say the least. One by one, Byrhtnoth and a group of his best retainers are cut down. In retrospect, such an unremitting sequence of losses, even if glorious ones, casts into doubt the practical wisdom of a purely hawkish response to the Viking threat.[40]

2. *The fight at the ford* (lines 62–95). As in the *Liber Eliensis*, which tells of a preliminary battle fought at a bridge over a body of water, this initial combat is portrayed as a clear victory for the English. The victory remains inconclusive, however, in that it leaves the main army of Vikings intact. The vivid images associated with this incident — the tide flowing in and out, the men waiting impatiently at each shore, the holding of the causeway by three named warriors — provide the kind of circumstantial detail that has led some readers to believe that the poet must have been an eyewitness of the events he describes.[41] There is a narrative logic that governs this section, however. Byrhtnoth's success in this initial skirmish has a fatal effect, for it reinforces his confidence in his ability to resist

[40] Heather Stuart, 'The Meaning of *Maldon*', *Neoph*, 66 (1982), 126–39, offers the most thoroughgoing anti-heroic reading of the poem that has yet been advanced. The differences between her view and mine are many and significant. According to Stuart, for example, the flight of the deserters is a triumph of realism, while the decision of Byrhtnoth and his loyal retainers to fight to their death is a heroic fantasy that emanates from feelings of fear and panic; the poem thus exposes the folly of war. In my own view, which is in accord with that of the great majority of commentators, the cowards are berated for their desertion, while Byrhtnoth and his loyal retainers are portrayed as noble in defeat. The poem is far from being a pacifist document that condemns warfare per se; rather, it is a myth-like account of the tragedy that results from the heroic decision to fight a force that, as events prove, is too formidable to be overcome.

[41] See note 6 above on the 'eyewitness' approach to *Maldon*.

any challenge. When the Vikings then make a second offer, namely that they be allowed to cross over the ford to engage the English in a general combat, Byrhtnoth in accepting it commits his second tactical mistake. As before, he is shown making a magnificent gesture that commands admiration, for it issues from a superabundance of courage. On its face, there is nothing foolish about this choice. Byrhtnoth had apparently never opposed an enemy he could not defeat. The Vikings were known to shun pitched battles, and though we are not told of Byrhtnoth's motives, one may imagine his satisfaction at being granted this opportunity to cripple the invaders. At the same time, as events prove, Byrhtnoth underestimates both the Vikings' power and his own vulnerability. The narrator, blessed with hindsight, is explicit in condemning his choice: Byrhtnoth offers 'too much land' to the Vikings (*landes to fela*, 90a), and the Norsemen advance as a direct result of his pride, or excess of courage (*for his ofermode*, 89b). The meaning of the key term *ofermod* has been fought out in the critical literature, and there is no point in reiterating that debate here. M. R. Godden has pointed out that the semantic field of the word *mod* frequently encompasses the idea of a 'dangerous, rebellious inner force' in Anglo-Saxon literature; the intensifying prefix *ofer-* clearly magnifies this sense here.[42] Few readers today doubt that in the context of the narrator's negative judgement concerning the wisdom of allowing the whole Viking army to advance, the term carries at least some pejorative force.[43]

3. *Byrhtnoth's last fight and death* (lines 96–184). All the medieval sources agree on one feature of the battle, if only on this one: that in it Byrhtnoth met his death. One can scarcely praise too highly the narrative skill with which the *Maldon* poet dramatizes this incident. From the narrator's initial evocation of the advance of the 'slaughter wolves' over the causeway (*wælwulfas*, 96a) to Byrhtnoth's final request for peace at the hands of God, his eyes raised towards heaven, while for a brief 'time out of time' all narrative action is suspended (172–80), the passage moves inexorably towards its end. If the poet knew of the legend of Byrhtnoth's decapitation, he gives no sign that he did. Instead, rather than introducing this gruesome detail to the narrative, he focuses attention on the man's undaunted spirit as he strikes down one enemy after another, receives three dire wounds (each one of which might have been enough to fell a lesser man), and then, on the

[42] Malcolm Godden, 'Anglo-Saxons on the Mind', in *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England: Studies Presented to Peter Clemoes on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. by Michael Lapidge and Helmut Gneuss (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 271–98 (p. 295).

[43] A definitive statement in this debate has been offered by Helmut Gneuss, '*The Battle of Maldon* 89: Byrhtnoth's *Ofermod* Once Again', *SPh*, 73 (1976), 117–37.

verge of death, still urges his companions on and prays to God for his personal salvation. The narrator makes clear that Byrhtnoth dies every inch a hero, a man of supreme piety as well as courage, whose only fault was his excess of confidence. If there was ever a man to fight off the Vikings, the poet implies, this was the one. Also implied in Byrhtnoth's fall is a corollary question: where now in England is there a man who can succeed where Byrhtnoth failed?[44]

4. *The flight of the cowardly retainers* (lines 185–201). Among the various accounts of the battle, only the *Life of St Oswald* agrees with the *Maldon* poet in mentioning a flight that followed after Byrhtnoth's fall. In the *Life*, however, the flight is a general one. In the poem, a contingent flees after three named men (Godric, Godwine, and Godwig, the three sons of Odda) turn for the woods and ride away, the first of them on Byrhtnoth's own war-horse. In the poet's eyes, the flight of these brothers represents not only cowardice but treachery as well, for he specifies that they abandoned their good lord (*þone godan forlet*, 187b) in the heat of the fight, with no thought for the gifts that they had received at his hands. Later, one of the thegns who stands firm at the front condemns their act as a 'betrayal', in that it touches off a general flight. 'Us Godric hæfð, / earh Oddan bearn, ealle beswicene' (Godric, the cowardly son of Odda, has betrayed us all, 237b–38), Offa laments. Several readers have seen this breach of faith as so central to the poet's design as to regard it as 'the turning point and central issue of the poem'.[45]

In the annals of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the later years of Æthelred's reign, complaints about such breaches of faith, verging on treason, are reiterated with distressing frequency, as has more than once been remarked.[46] In 992

[44] Scragg has made this point with reference to history, not just the fictionalized account of history that the poem presents: 'Partly through long life and partly through force of personality, Byrhtnoth had established military sway in England second to none. The loss of so experienced a commander must have had a significant effect on the aristocracy, both spiritual and lay, and the decision to buy off the invaders may have been taken on the assumption that if Byrhtnoth could not contain them, no one could' (Scragg 1981, p. 19).

[45] Anderson, '*The Battle of Maldon*: A Reappraisal', p. 259. See also Judith Johnson, 'The Real Villains of *The Battle of Maldon*', *Michigan Academician*, 17 (1985), 409–15, and cf. Busse and Holtei, '*The Battle of Maldon*: A Historical, Heroic and Political Poem', p. 616.

[46] *EHD*, pp. 234–44. My references are to versions CDE of the *Chronicle* unless otherwise noted. Due allowance for this chronicler's characteristic bias should be made; for discussion of that bias, see Keynes, 'Declining Reputation', pp. 229–36. In studies published in 1994–95, practically concurrently with the original version of the present chapter (which appeared in 1994), three Anglo-Saxonists discuss the tumult of these times. Hugh Magennis, 'Treatments of Treachery and Betrayal in Anglo-Saxon Texts', *ES*, 76 (1995), 1–19, offers a supple and wide-ranging discussion

Ealdorman Ælfric sent warning to the Vikings in advance of an attack, then 'absconded by night from the army, to his own great disgrace'. In 993 the three leaders of an English army that was mustered to fight Viking invaders at the mouth of the Humber fled, starting a general flight. In 998, whenever the English set forth to fight the invaders, 'a flight was always instigated by some means'. In 999 the Kentish levy turned and fled. In 1001, according to the Parker Chronicle, Swein's brother-in-law Pallig deserted Æthelred in spite of all the pledges that the English king had given him and the gifts he had received. In 1003 Ealdorman Ælfric, 'up to his old tricks', feigned illness and refused to lead his army forth. In 1010 'there was no leader who would collect an army, but each fled as best he could'. In 1011 Ælfmær, Abbot of St Augustine's, Canterbury, allowed the Vikings inside the city by treachery. Rarely during these years was there a time, it seems, when Æthelred could count on the unambiguous support of the leading men of the realm.

Those English noblemen who were of mixed Anglo-Danish heritage were particularly vulnerable to the charge of treason on account of their possibly mixed loyalties. Significantly, Odda, the father of the three brothers who are said to flee at Maldon, bears a name that could very easily be construed as an anglicized form of the common Scandinavian personal name *Oddr*.[47] Since that man's three sons bear English names, several possibilities present themselves. (1) If Odda is the poet's invention, then by ascribing him a Scandinavian-sounding name, the poet may have wanted to associate him (and by extension his family) with the class of

of the themes of treachery and betrayal both in Anglo-Saxon literature as a whole and in texts from the later Anglo-Saxon period, 'a period when treachery and betrayal appear to have been of particularly urgent interest to writers' (p. 1). The most insistent of these writers, as Magennis demonstrates, was the archbishop, lawmaker, and homilist Wulfstan. Malcolm Godden, 'Apocalypse and Invasion in Late Anglo-Saxon England', in *From Anglo-Saxon to Early Middle English: Studies Presented to E. G. Stanley*, ed. by Malcolm Godden, Douglas Gray, and Terry Hoad (Oxford, 1994), pp. 130–62, traces at greater length 'the moral and theological problems posed by successful invasion, and particularly invasion of a sophisticated Christian civilization by heathen barbarians' (p. 130). Godden devotes close attention to Wulfstan's complex and emergent attitude towards the Vikings, seen both as raiders and as reminders of the coming of the Antichrist, whose mission was to corrupt English mores as well as to threaten them from without. Jonathan Wilcox, '*The Battle of Maldon* and *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 979–1016: A Winning Combination', *Proceedings of the Medieval Association of the Midwest*, 3 (1995), 31–50, emphasizes the usefulness of the *Chronicle* entries as a reading context for the poem, especially as regards the themes of flight, cowardice, and betrayal.

[47] Discussion of this onomastic point, which has been disputed, can be found at pp. 239–41 below.

assimilated Danes. (2) If Odda was a historical person who bore this name, then he could have been a Dane who had married into the English lesser nobility; if so, he obviously 'stood for' the class of assimilated Danes. (3) If Odda was an Englishman who happened to bear this name, then he still could have been mistaken for a Dane by any members of the audience who heard or read this poem and who did not already know his ethnicity. Who Odda was and how his name is to be accounted for is likely to remain a mystery, and preserving that mystery may in fact have been part of the poet's intent. What can be said with confidence is that the name 'Odda' stands out noticeably among the names that figure in the poem. It has, at the least, a foreign sound to it. The deployment of that particular name at this key moment in the action, precisely when the themes of cowardice and treachery and betrayal are introduced, calls attention (even if in an ultimately ambiguous fashion) to the issue of trust, or the lack of it, between Englishmen and anglicized Danes.[48]

Few issues were as crucial as this during the long period extending from the reign of Alfred to the reign of Cnut. The St Brice's Day massacre of 1002, when Æthelred is said to have ordered all Danes in England to be killed 'because the king had been informed that they would treacherously deprive him, and then all his councillors, of life', brought this issue to an infamous head.[49] The *Maldon* poet introduces the theme of betrayal to his narrative for much the same reason, evidently, as he introduces the theme of tribute: to encapsulate in one grand story the pressing political issues and tensions of his time. One of the foremost of those issues was the loyalty of persons of Danish descent to their English rulers when the land was threatened by Danish attacks.

5. *The heroic stand of the loyal retainers* (lines 202–325). Once the sons of Odda ride for the woods, thereby touching off a large-scale flight, those warriors who stay at the front are in desperate straits. The rest of the poem recounts the exemplary resistance of twelve named heroes, each one of whom is shown choosing to stay and fight, whatever the personal cost of that decision may be. Here in

[48] See Anderson, '*The Battle of Maldon*: A Reappraisal', pp. 258–59. Interestingly, John of Worcester adds to his *Chronicle* source for the year 993 that the three English leaders who fled during a campaign near the mouth of the Humber at this time did so 'because they were Danes on their father's side'. One of these leaders is named Godwine, like his fugitive counterpart in *The Battle of Maldon*. It could be that memories or oral reports of the flight of men of Anglo-Danish heritage in 993 came to be attached to Maldon and the battle fought there in 991. If so, we see here another striking instance of mythopoesis at work, as events originally separate in time and space are conflated into a single unified story.

[49] *EHD*, pp. 238–39 (versions CDE).

particular is evident what Dolores Frese has called the poem's 'dazzling varieties of impersonated consciousness', as more than a third of this part of the poem consists of direct speech in the form of monologues imagined to be uttered by one or another of these men.[50]

Many readers of the poem accept that some if not all of these named warriors were real persons who died in this battle and who are therefore given an exemplary role. As George Clark has suggested, the men may be named precisely because their death at the front, assuming that they were actual warriors, would have exempted their heirs from repayment of the heriot and possible loss of their land. According to section 78 of part two of the *Laws of Cnut*, 'the heriot is to be remitted for the man who falls before his lord in a campaign, whether it is within the land or outside the land; and the heirs are to succeed to the land and to the possessions and divide it very justly'.[51] Similarly, the poet's naming of Godwine and the other sons of Odda may be significant in the light of section 77 of the same code, which specifies that 'the man who, through cowardice, deserts his lord or his comrades on a military expedition, whether by sea or by land, shall lose all that he possesses and his own life'.[52] Although the *Laws of Cnut* post-date the battle fought at Maldon, they may have codified customs that were honoured at least in principle in earlier times. The poet's specificity concerning who stayed and who fled the battle is understandable, given the practical rewards and punishments that awaited those persons in military service who either died beside their lord or deserted him on a campaign. Far more than this practical factor is involved in the poet's dramatization of the stand of the loyal retainers, however. In scene after scene, the physical presence of each of these individual men is forced upon our consciousness. Not only do the men speak, each one with his distinctive voice; they act, with precise physical movements. The whole group presses forward (*þa hi forð eodon*, 260a); Offa shakes his ash-wood spear to command attention (*æscholt asceoc*, 230b) before he is cut to pieces (*forheawen*, 288b); Æscferð lets fly many an arrow, sometimes striking a shield and sometimes a man (269–70); Wistan strikes down three Vikings before he lies dead among the slain (*ær* [*he*]

[50] Dolores Warwick Frese, 'Poetic Prowess in *Brunanburh* and *Maldon*: Winning, Losing, and Literary Outcome', in *Modes of Interpretation*, ed. by Brown, Crampton, and Robinson, pp. 83–99 (p. 83).

[51] Clark, '*The Battle of Maldon*: A Heroic Poem', p. 60; *EHD*, p. 466; for the Old English text see *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, ed. by Felix Liebermann, 3 vols (Halle, 1903–16), I (1903), 364.

[52] Richard P. Abels, *Lordship and Military Obligation in Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1988), p. 149; for the Old English text see *Die Gesetze*, ed. by Liebermann, I, 364.

[. . .] *on þam wæle læge*, 300). In instance after instance, Byrhtnoth's charismatic example of resistance in the face of death is repeated at a lower social rank.

In evoking the heroic stand of the loyal retainers, the *Maldon* poet again shows his originality. Among the analogues, only the *Life of St Oswald* raises this theme, and it does so in the context of the Devonshire battle, not the battle that was fought in Essex by the shores of the river Pante. In *Maldon* we thus again see the results of narrative compression. Dramatic examples of flight and of heroic resistance are put on exhibit as two sides of the same coin, two contrasting responses to the same existential dilemma. What is of greater value, the poet implicitly asks: life, or the way one lives it? The veteran warrior Byrhtwold, whose name as well as whose age implies an affinity with Byrhtnoth, answers this question most directly. In the present circumstances, a long life alone, if achieved at the cost of flight, will only mean lasting grief at the thought of a dear lord's death and a great opportunity missed to avenge him. This, at any rate, I take to be the meaning of his remark 'A mæg gnornian / se ðe nu fram þis wigplegan wendan þenceð' (Ever will he have cause to mourn who intends to turn now from this battleplay, 315b–16).

The Battle of Maldon can then be read as a work that uses a particular event, drawn from history though rendered schematically, as the core of a story that gives coherent literary expression to the most pressing political issues of the poet's day. In the stylized fashion that is characteristic of hagiography and heroic poetry, the poem treats its subject with grand extravagance. Everything is made larger or more vivid than life. As is habitual in heroic narrative, the conflict is polarized into extremes.[53] The heathen wolves of war are arrayed against the pious English warriors; the faithless sons of Odda are juxtaposed with the loyal retainers who stand firm; there is a cowardly Godric (186–90) and a brave Godric (320–24). The game of war (*guðplega*, 61a; *wigplega*, 316a) is choreographed into a deft dance as pairs of Norse and English warriors face one another and make deadly exchanges of blows. Favourite lines and half-lines punctuate the narrative with iterative force: 'wæl feol on eorðan' (the dead fell to earth, 126b, repeated at 303b); a certain warrior stands firm 'þa hwile ðe he wæpna wealdan moste' (as long as he was able to use weapons, 272; cf. 83). The favourite numbers of traditional narrative are preferred. Three men defend the causeway; three times Byrhtnoth is

[53] Rosenberg, *Custer and the Epic of Defeat*, ch. 9, 'Laws of Contrast' (pp. 253–86). Jerome Mandel has emphasized that Old English verse in general is ordered according to the principle of rhetorical and structural contrast: 'Contrast in Old English Poetry', *Chaucer Review*, 6 (1971), 1–13. *Maldon* is a dynamic instance of this tendency.

wounded; Byrhtnoth and two companions fall dead side by side; three brothers flee; twelve named warriors stand firm after Byrhtnoth's fall.[54]

In its schematic way, *The Battle of Maldon* thus turns a key incident drawn from the Viking troubles of the 990s into a showpiece of contemporary ethics and politics. In this narrative poem, the cause of the English defeat is overdetermined. The point of the poem, unlike that of the annals, is not just that Byrhtnoth dies and tribute is given. Rather, Byrhtnoth's refusal to pay tribute, coupled with his lack of discretion in permitting the Vikings to advance past the causeway, leads directly to his death. Both his conduct and that of his thegns is exemplary, whether for good or for ill. Indeed, both Byrhtnoth and his loyal retainers present models of that kind of charismatic leadership by which a people can be galvanized into a common purpose. Stage by stage, as the narrative progresses, the actions and motives of the men who figure in the action exemplify the two great issues of this period in English history: the need to negotiate peace with the Vikings versus the will to resist them by force, and the centrifugal drift towards separate survival strategies among the English and Anglo-Danish nobility versus the charismatic, centripetal power of overlordship.

Conclusion: The Cult of Suicidal Devotion, or the Code of Vengeance?

The messages encoded in *The Battle of Maldon* are complex to the point, perhaps, of seeming contradictory. The poet gazes with longing at a vanished world when choices were simple, when all a great lord needed to do when confronted by roving bands of marauders was to shout '*Noli progredi!*' (or its Old English equivalent), then clear the way for a knockdown fight. Byrhtnoth makes this choice, and it is a grand one, and it leads to a splendid disaster. For his world is already the flawed one of historical contingency. Instrumental in the defeat at Maldon is the role of those English warriors who make a separate peace by showing their backs. The poem thus prepares the ground for the sad conclusion that whatever Byrhtnoth did, no other English lord should attempt. If even the legendary Byrhtnoth, backed by his elite troops as well as the *fyrd* of the men of Essex, all of them armed and in good array, could not defeat an army of Vikings on their home turf, then how could any other leader be expected to do so?

[54] Hillman, 'Defeat and Victory in *The Battle of Maldon*', p. 392, notes that the number twelve recalls the paradigm of Christ's disciples. Here again (as with Charlemagne's *douze pers* in Old French epic poetry) may be seen the results of mythopoesis, as a local battle is represented in terms congruent with the central story of Christendom.

In this manner, the poem uses the counter-example of Byrhtnoth's *ofermod*, spiced by the treachery of the sons of Odda and the heroic but futile resistance of the other named warriors, to show the practical necessity of a policy of peacemaking that Æthelred pursued for many years, no matter how painful and repugnant this policy must at times have been. The poem did this work, probably, with little consciousness on the part of its author that this was what the story signified; but such is the usual way of myth, which routinely encodes ideological messages in the form of a simple account of past deeds. Psychologically speaking, the pain and humiliation that attended England's appeasement of the Vikings were probably the driving forces that brought the poem into being in this form. Certainly the striking thing about the poem is how much more it has to say, in images that display what Edward Irving has called 'the burden of individual choice', than the bare theme of Byrhtnoth's death required.[55]

What the poem does not do, or does not chiefly do, on the other hand, is to celebrate a death wish on the part of the English warriors, a kind of collective lemming-like impulse towards self-destruction. And yet this misapprehension is at the heart of a modern myth that has grown up around the poem, a myth that is in some ways as interesting as the medieval one that turned the incident of Byrhtnoth's death into a showpiece of contemporary issues.

This modern myth could be called 'the Balaklava syndrome', in that it calls to mind the ideology that provided a justification for the heroic sacrifices and the sometimes brutal expenditures of human life that were attendant upon nineteenth-century imperial politics: 'Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die.'[56] According to a way of reading *The Battle of Maldon* that became popular in the nineteenth century and that remains dominant today, the conflict described in the poem has a timeless meaning that transcends the historical context of the late tenth century. The poem is important as presenting a test of character against which any man can measure himself.[57] The headnote that introduces the

[55] Irving, 'Heroic Style', p. 464. Similarly, Busse and Holtei, '*The Battle of Maldon*: A Historical, Heroic and Political Poem', observe that amplification and repetition in the speeches of the loyal retainers serve 'to pose the critical problem of decision over and over again' (p. 617).

[56] Tennyson wrote 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', from which this famous line is taken, to honour men who died in an incident of the Crimean War that took place on 25 October 1854. Like *The Battle of Maldon*, his poem is better remembered today than the incident it commemorates. See further Scragg, '*The Battle of Maldon*: Fact or Fiction?', pp. 29–31.

[57] The masculine forms here ('any man can measure himself') are deliberate, for the test of character is a gender-specific one. Roberta Frank, '*The Battle of Maldon*: Its Reception,

poem in Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson's *Guide to Old English* expresses this view succinctly:

> The fighting men at Maldon, no less than those at Balaklava and Dunkirk, triumph in this test of character in a manner of which Englishmen have always been especially proud. The Anglo-Saxons who fight to the bitter end are portrayed by the poet as glorious in defeat, and their valour redeems the honour of their country.[58]

The key terms invoked in this kind of appreciation — 'pride', 'glory', 'valour', and 'honour' — are precisely those that define the ideal of gentlemanly conduct as seen through nineteenth- and early twentieth-century English eyes, as Mark Girouard has remarked in his fine book *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman*. For countless young men who grew into manhood during that era, glory in a noble, lost cause was the object of one's highest ambition. Girouard not only points out some of the delightful idiosyncracies that sometimes attended the late Romantic quest for honour and its pseudo-medieval chivalric trappings. He also notes how the idealism that was associated with the concept of the gentleman led directly into the unparalleled disaster of World War I: 'One conclusion is undeniable: the ideals of chivalry worked with one accord in favour of war.'[59]

When I teach *The Battle of Maldon* to university students today, I find it difficult to pierce through this accretion of chivalric vocabulary to engage directly with the issues posed in the text. Thanks in part to the impact of rhymes like 'Into the valley of Death rode the six hundred', with their exaltation of a military fiasco into an instance of sacrifice in a noble cause, the strings of modern readers' sensitivities tend to vibrate so sympathetically to the theme of suicidal devotion that it is sometimes hard to perceive that there is no death-wish in *Maldon*, or at least that this is not a dominant theme. A noteworthy death, yes. Byrhtnoth provides this, together with his loyal retainers. Examples of heroism? Yes, and in plenty, in the words and conduct of both Byrhtnoth and his men. But as for a collective

1726–1906', in *The Battle of Maldon: Fiction and Fact*, ed. by Cooper, pp. 237–47, notes that 'the heroic idealism of *Maldon*, its summons to perfection and self-sacrifice, was unfashionable in the eighteenth century, which shunned anything that smacked of "enthusiasm" or noble stupidity. But the nineteenth century was brimming with men refusing to leave sinking ships. All gentlemen knew that they must be courageous, show no sign of cowardice, be loyal to comrades, and meet death in battle without flinching' (p. 240).

[58] Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, *A Guide to Old English*, 6th edn (Oxford, 2001), p. 241.

[59] Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven, 1981), p. 276.

impulse towards suicide, or what in an influential article has been called 'the ideal of men dying with their lord', there is little trace of it here, despite a chorus of declarations to that effect that have been made by a number of scholars.[60]

[60] Rosemary Woolf, 'The Ideal of Men Dying with their Lord in the *Germania* and in *The Battle of Maldon*', *ASE*, 5 (1976), 63–81. Woolf notes that this imputed ideal is not found elsewhere in the surviving poetry of England: 'this idea was not an ancient and traditional commonplace of Old English heroic poetry but was new and strange' (p. 81). Elsewhere in Germanic heroic poetry 'what is required of a lord's retainer after his death is not that he should die with him as an end in itself but that he should effectively avenge his lord' (p. 69). The only way Woolf can account for the supposed presence of this ideal in *Maldon* is by postulating literary influence from the lost *Bjarkamál*, which is known only from Saxo Grammaticus's Latin verse paraphrase. Roberta Frank, 'The Ideal of Men Dying with their Lord in *The Battle of Maldon*: Anachronism or *Nouvelle Vague*', in *People and Places in Northern Europe 500–1600: Essays in Honour of Peter Hayes Sawyer*, ed. by Ian Wood and Niels Lund (Woodbridge, 1991), pp. 95–106, argues (against Woolf) that the ideal of dying with one's lord was not a Germanic survival borrowed into English from Old Norse, but rather represented an aspect of emergent medieval vassalage, informed by religious idealism.

I have not been able to trace the Woolfian vein in *Maldon* back beyond 1943, at which strategic time, when Churchill's wartime broadcasts to the English nation were yet vividly in mind, it was given voice in two influential publications. Charles W. Kennedy, *The Earliest English Poetry* (London, 1943), pp. 347–48, refers to Byrhtwold's words to the other retainers as a 'clarion call to fortitude and heroic death' and speaks of the retainers as 'devoting themselves to death'. F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1943), p. 377, states that Byrhtnoth's loyal thegns, 'knowing that the fight was lost, deliberately gave themselves to death'. This assertion has been repeated without correction in the 1947 and 1971 editions of Stenton's authoritative history. In more recent years, many critics have taken this dubious point for granted. G. V. Smithers, 'Destiny and the Heroic Warrior in *Beowulf*', in *Philological Essays: Studies [. . .] Herbert Dean Meritt*, ed. by James L. Rosier (The Hague, 1970), pp. 65–81, defines the Germanic heroic ethos in terms like these, though without explicit attention to Maldon. George Clark, 'The Battle of *The Battle of Maldon*', *NM*, 69 (1968), 374–79, states that 'every member of the English army chooses to flee and live or advance and die' (p. 378). Woolf, 'Ideal of Men Dying', speaks both of the retainers' 'determination to die' and of their 'decision to die' and characterizes Maldon as a story 'in which paradoxically it is better to lose than to win' (pp. 67, 81, and 81, respectively). Robinson, 'Some Aspects', refers to Byrhtnoth's 'election' of an honourable death (p. 28). In 'God, Death, and Loyalty in *The Battle of Maldon*', in *J. R. R. Tolkien, Scholar and Storyteller*, ed. by Mary Salu and Robert T. Farrell (Ithaca, NY, 1974), pp. 76–98, Robinson not only states that the retainers 'decide to die' (p. 97) but implies that Byrhtnoth too desires to die for the sake of entry to a better world (p. 83). John M. Hill, 'The Good Fields of Grief: Remnants of Christian Conversion', *Psychocultural Review*, 2 (1978), 27–43, speaks of the warriors' 'suicidal commitment' (p. 36), their 'suicidal loyalty, a glorious commitment to smite the foe and then join one's lord in death' (p. 39), and of their 'suicidal heroism leading to transfigured existence' (p. 41). Stuart, 'Meaning of *Maldon*', speaks of Byrhtnoth's 'desire for self-destruction' and of his retainers' acceptance of

An approach to the poem as a work in praise of suicidal self-sacrifice is fraught with difficulties. First, although some of the men are killed, the group of loyal retainers is not necessarily wiped out at Maldon, despite statements to that effect that are found in the critical literature.[61] The idea that the poem ended with the courageous last stand of the remaining English warriors, in the manner of Roland's men at Rencesvals or Custer's at the Little Big Horn, is part of a modern myth that has grown up around the story, for the poem breaks off before the fate of the English is made clear. This imagined annihilation of the warriors is confirmed by neither the *Chronicle*, which does not specify the extent of English losses, nor the *Life of St Oswald*, which states that at the end of the battle there were scarcely enough Vikings left to man their ships. The idea that the poem ended by describing the annihilation of the loyal retainers is one striking illustration of how *The Battle of Maldon* has been drawn out of the orbit of practical vengeance literature and has been made a prime exhibit in the post-romantic cult of suicidal devotion.

Second, the narrator never states that the loyal thegns know that the battle is lost, nor does any one of them reveal such knowledge through his own words. True, they know that their situation is critical: Byrhtnoth is dead, and the English ranks are broken thanks to the flight of the sons of Odda. It is for this reason that the retainers urge one another on, exhorting one another to put away thoughts of saving their lives through flight so that they may achieve their goal of inflicting

the idea of 'group suicide' (pp. 132 and 136 respectively). Hillman, 'Defeat and Victory in *The Battle of Maldon*', declares that after Byrhtnoth dies, his men 'go forward [...] determined to fight until they meet a similarly glorious end' (p. 391). Anderson, '*The Battle of Maldon*: A Reappraisal', sees as the poem's central theme 'the ideal of suicidal fighting as an expression of loyalty' (p. 264); in 'The Roman Idea of a *Comitatus* and its Application to *The Battle of Maldon*', *Mediaevalia*, 17 (1994 for 1991), 15–26, however, he offers an important modification of this claim, showing that 'suicidal loyalty to one's lord was a Roman ethnographic trope used to describe barbarian warriors' rather than a feature of the Germanic military sensibility (p. 21). Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, 'Heroic Values and Christian Ethics', in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. by Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 107–25 (at p. 123), speaks of the 'suicidal military virtues' that are ascribed to the English, perhaps on the model of those of their Viking opponents. To conclude this brief survey, John M. Hill returns to the theme of 'suicidal loyalty to one's lord' in his article 'Transcendental Loyalty in *The Battle of Maldon*' at p. 68 and elsewhere, taking this poem as unique in the corpus of Old English verse in its celebration of this ideal.

[61] See for example George K. Anderson, *The Literature of the Anglo-Saxons* (Princeton, 1949), p. 93: 'From our superior vantage-point of history we know that the brave English forces were annihilated before the Viking Danes got possession of the field.'

grievous losses on their enemies (see for example lines 257–64, which focus on the need for action in indifference to the threat of death). The point is that the danger the men face gives them all the more reason to stand firm, or their cause will indeed be lost.

Third and most importantly, despite this emphasis on the importance of indifference to death, Byrhtnoth never speaks of a positive desire to die, nor do any of the retainers express an inclination to die beside him with the exception of Byrhtwold and, possibly, Leofsunu.

Byrhtwold is a special case. He is aged, as the narrator states — 'se wæs eald geneat' (he was an old retainer, 310a) — and as he himself declares: 'ic eom frod feores' ('I am advanced in years', 317a).[62] His inspirational speech to the retainers (lines 312–19) should be seen in the context of both his advanced age and his strong personal devotion to Byrhtnoth, whom he calls *leof* 'well-beloved' (319a). To be blunt, geriatric warriors have little to lose by a death only slightly hastened by the spear. They may have much to gain if their conduct earns them lasting fame, as Byrhtwold's does. Knowing full well that he is soon to die in any event, Byrhtwold scorns flight and declares his intention to stand firm, urging his fellow warriors to new heights of heroic action to make up for the deaths of their companions. What he calls for is *mod*, not martyrdom. If he should fall, still, he knows he will have the consolation of lying beside his dear lord *ðegenlice* ('in a manner befitting a thegn', 294a), as his comrade Offa has done.

As for Leofsunu, his speech directly follows Offa's condemnation of Godric's breach of faith, and it must be read in the context of this betrayal. Leofsunu declares that unlike the cowards, he will not yield a single foot. No one in his home village of Sturmere, Essex, will have cause to taunt him for turning away, he vows, but on the contrary, 'me sceal wæpen niman, / ord and iren' (weapons, the spear and the sword, are destined to take me, 252b–53a). Assuming that the poet introduces Leofsunu to the narrative because a man of this name did indeed die at Maldon, the words that are ascribed to him have prophetic value. Conscious of his imminent death — note the verb *sculan*, which characteristically implies duty, certainty, necessity, or fate — Leofsunu chooses to carry on with the fight rather than be disgraced like Godric. No word indicates that he actually wishes to die. What we are told is that he desires to avoid the ignominy of flight — 'fleam he forhogode' (he scorned flight, 254b) — and that, like the other loyal retainers, he

[62] Robinson, 'Some Aspects', pp. 38–40, reviews and rejects the claim that has been made by several critics that the adjectives *eald* and *frod* imply only experience or trustworthiness, not age.

hopes above all to avenge Byrhtnoth: 'ic [. . .] wille [. . .] wrecan on gewinne mine winedrihten ('I wish to avenge my lord in the fight', 246–48).

Statement after statement in the poem makes clear that it is this desire for vengeance, not a desire for death, that chiefly motivates the loyal retainers. At the beginning of this section of the narrative, the poet makes the terms of their choice explicit:

> Þa ðær wendon forð wlance þegenas,
> unearge men efston georne:
> hi woldon þa ealle oðer twega,
> lif forlæt[a]n oððe leofne gewrecan. (205–08)

(Then the proud thegns pressed forward there; the uncowed men pushed on eagerly. They all wished one [that is, the second] of two alternatives: to lose their lives or to avenge their beloved lord.)

One of the oddities of the criticism of *Maldon* is that every editor and translator whose work I have been able to consult has interpreted the key phrase *oðer twega* (207b) in a neutral sense, taking it to mean 'one of two alternatives', rather than in the more specific sense 'the second of two alternatives' that seems to be required here. Clearly the phrase can have the former meaning.[63] That it need do so, particularly in the poetry, is open to question. In innumerable instances in Old English poetry and prose, the word 'oðer' serves as the ordinal numeral and can be translated 'second' or 'other.' As the poem progresses, the warriors who stand firm at Maldon proceed to gain this second, more welcome end. They neither wish to die, nor do they necessarily do so. Some of them clearly fall in battle: Edward, Offa, Wistan, and Godric do, and apparently Leofsunu, Æscferð, and Byrhtwold do as well. Others may survive. Ælfwine, Dunnere, Æthelric, Oswold, and Eadwold all urge their companions on without the poet giving any explicit indication as to their fate.

The effect of the poet's naming the first of these two alternatives, 'to lose their lives', is to underscore the heroic resolve of the men who stand fast. Even though they know that their lives hang in the balance, these men prefer heroic action in pursuit of vengeance to a life of shame. First Ælfwine, Byrhtnoth's kinsman, presses forward, remembering his feud (*fæhðe*, 225b), until he strikes down one of the Vikings. Then Offa castigates the fugitives and urges his companions to press on. Leofsunu vows that he will push forward to avenge his lord (*wrecan*, 248a). Dunnere, a ceorl, calls on each of the warriors to avenge Byrhtnoth (*wrece*, 257b;

[63] Bosworth and Toller, s.v. *ōðer*, sense I.1 ('oðer twega').

wrecan, 258b). Fighting hard in response to this plea, the warriors then pray to God that they may avenge Byrhtnoth (*gewrecan*, 263a) and bring destruction on their enemies. Æscferð, using his bow to good effect, strikes down many a Viking. Edward the Tall breaks through the Norse shieldwall and nobly avenges his lord (*wurðlice wrec*, 279a). Æthelric fights with determination as well. Offa cuts down a Viking before he falls. Wistan kills three men before he too succumbs. Oswold, Eadwold, and Byrhtwold all urge on their comrades, and Godric — the brave one, not the coward — does much damage before he too falls in battle. Here the fragment breaks off, with no clue as to the number of men who survive and with no statement as to which army wins control of the battlefield. While the English suffer grievous losses, the poet makes clear that they have at least partially succeeded in their great desire to avenge their lord.[64]

The theme of vengeance that dominates the last part of the poem is not a congenial one to modern readers, and perhaps it is for this reason that one hears little about it in the critical literature about *Maldon*. In the chivalric world of the English gentleman, the urge to bathe one's hands in the blood of one's enemies is a vulgar one. What a gentleman wants is to suffer poignantly in a noble cause. The history of the vulgarization of the concept of vengeance would make a fascinating topic for a different paper.[65] What is important to note here is that in the early medieval world, vengeance was still sometimes a social duty. In theory, and apparently sometimes in practice, it was the great peacekeeper. The Icelandic sagas show us no lack of acts of vengeance that are undertaken reluctantly, by decent people who experience no tumult of passion in their hearts but who feel impelled to act because of their duties to their kindred. According to the early northern code of conduct, it was a *failure* to exact revenge that was potentially destabilizing,

[64] O. D. Macrae-Gibson, '*Maldon*: The Literary Structure of the Later Part', *NM*, 71 (1970), 192–96, speaks of a 'steady change of emphasis as the poem proceeds from loyalty expressed by vengeance to loyalty expressed by death' (p. 195). While there is some basis for this conclusion, the poet does not make clear that the retainers who are named first are able to avenge Byrhtnoth without dying, nor that the retainers who are named later die without avenging him; the three themes of loyalty, death, and vengeance are subtly intertwined.

[65] In secular literature, as far as I can judge, it is not until the early modern period that one can see strong evidence of the deflation of vengeance as an honourable ideal. In Webster and Tourneur's lurid play *The Revenger's Tragedy*, for example, the urge for revenge is represented as a personal passion, and hence as something unruly and socially destabilizing. Hamlet has his problems with revenge precisely because he is sensitive enough to see it as a tainted enterprise, especially in a universe governed by a God with a strong stake in the sixth commandment. The warriors depicted in *The Battle of Maldon* have no such qualms.

for a family that did not gain recompense for an injury was offering an open invitation for others to repeat the crime.[66]

In late tenth-century England, the influence of the Church and the advancing hegemony of the West Saxon royal line had weakened the code of vengeance somewhat as far as affairs within the realm were concerned. The payment of wergild under protection of the king's peace was supplanting the blood-feud as the basis of social order.[67] But in international affairs, then as now, acts of violence tended to be both perpetrated and punished outside the workings of a stable system of law. When tribe meets tribe or nation meets nation, as when child meets child on the inner-city playground, what tends to count is deterrence: the threat of massive retaliation, if you will. Often, in these contexts, the threat of violence is enough to forestall violence. The ideal deterrent is one that is never used. When deterrence fails, however, a handsome thrashing of an aggressor may lend credence to earlier threats and may work wonders in forestalling additional injuries; or this, at least, for better or for worse, is the theory that has governed most conduct since time immemorial in contexts where the rule of law is insecure.

The *Maldon* poet asks us to visualize the kind of disaster that can ensue when deterrence fails and some rather insolent Viking raiders, living outside English law, attempt to extort money from the men of Essex and their leader, Byrhtnoth. The Vikings would never make such an attempt at extortion, we may assume, if they were not confident in their own abilities and reputation in war. The action

[66] On the theory and practice of the feud within the medieval Icelandic social context, see Jesse L. Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Berkeley, 1982), Theodore M. Andersson and William Ian Miller, *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland: Ljósvetninga Saga and Valla-Ljóts Saga* (Stanford, 1989), pp. 22–51, and Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacekeeping: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago, 1990). The Anglo-Saxonist who has done the most in recent years to clarify the inner logic of the feud is John M. Hill, particularly in ch. 1 ('Feud Settlements in *Beowulf*') of *The Cultural World in Beowulf* (Toronto, 1995), pp. 25–37. Hill casts much light on the jural respectability of feuds and acts of retaliatory violence within the world represented in *Beowulf* and other heroic poetry. Where Hill's views are perhaps most open to refinement is in regard to the perspective that a Christian poet may have had when reflecting upon the violence that seems to have been endemic during pagan times (or, for that matter, Christian times). It is possible to acknowledge the possible legitimacy of the feud as a human institution while also lamenting its occasionally disastrous effects, on an earth where there can be no hope for the lasting resolution of conflict.

[67] Even so, this evolution was not a sudden one, nor has it ever taken complete effect. As Dorothy Whitelock notes in *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1951), p. 13, 'killing for the sake of vengeance was not felt to be incompatible with Christian ethics at any period in Anglo-Saxon times'.

of the poem confirms how well founded this confidence is, for the men succeed in striking down not only Byrhtnoth but a number of elite troops as well. In turn, the Norsemen suffer grievous casualties. The result, according to all that survives of the poem, is a terrible set of losses on both sides. While evidently the English warriors punish the Vikings enough to compensate for their lord's death, their success clearly falls short of what would be required for them to retain their reputation as a people best left alone. In the future, the poem implies, the English will have to negotiate their relations with the Vikings delicately if they are to overcome the legacy of this loss.

When we study mythopoesis in *The Battle of Maldon*, then, we have to study two phenomena: first, how the story of Byrhtnoth's death was elevated into a myth-like narrative of defiance, betrayal, loyalty, vengeance, and loss; and second, how a different myth of suicidal devotion has grown up around this poem in recent times. Without denigrating the chivalric code and the stunning sacrifices that it has at times inspired, I would claim that the message of the earlier myth of Maldon has less to do with the ideal of suicidal devotion than with the pragmatics of violence and accommodation in a world that was spinning rapidly out of English control. The myth tells us that Byrhtnoth's policy of frontal resistance to the Vikings failed, so that it ceased to be a viable option with his death.

As we know today, Æthelred's policy of buying the peace was also to fail in the face of rising Danish power. Æthelred's failure became evident only gradually over many years, however, while Byrhtnoth's was manifest in a day. As Eric John notes, thirty-four years passed between the first Viking attacks and the acceptance of Swein as king of the English people.[68] Perhaps the poet composed his work too soon after 991 to have knowledge of Swein's and Cnut's eventual conquests. For whatever reasons, the poem seems almost opaque in its refusal to present the story of what happened at Maldon within an overt political frame. All we can say with confidence is that *The Battle of Maldon*, in common with many other works of imaginative literature, presents a complex vision of reality whereby conflicting desires and codes of conduct meet and clash. At the same time as the poem looks with longing eyes at a vanished world where heroes could act like heroes, secure in the knowledge that their sufferings would make a song for people to come, it also points ineluctably to the need for leadership of a more supple kind than Byrhtnoth is shown to offer.

[68] John, 'War and Society', p. 183.

Response

On Stylized Numbers, Odda's Name, and Propaganda

On Threes and Twelves

One reader of the original version of the preceding chapter, Stephen J. Harris, has called me to task for stating that 'the favorite numbers of traditional narrative are preferred' in *The Battle of Maldon* without my having specified what narratives I had in mind. At that point of my essay I referred to the life of Christ (thinking of the twelve apostles, in particular) and the Old French epic cycle centred on Charlemagne (thinking chiefly of the *douze pers*), but neither of those allusions is especially lucid or informative.[1] For his part, Harris would connect the poem to Christian contexts in which conventional numbers play a prominent role.

> Trinities play a very large part in Christian typology, as do twelves. Twelve is considered a mystical number in both Christian and Jewish tradition. The Christian God exists in a trinity, the Holy Family is a trinity, and Christ was crucified among a trinity with a trinity of nails, for example. Unidentified 'traditional narratives' rather than Christian texts do not seem to me to contribute much to rendering relevant significance to these numbers.[2]

Perhaps a clarification of my point is in order.

Skilled storytellers, among whom the *Maldon* poet was one, are often deeply influenced by the dominant religion of their time. At the end of the first

[1] See p. 227 above. At the back of my mind when I referred to the Charlemagne cycle was a set of stylized numbers that have some importance there, as is set forth in my article 'The Ideal Depiction of Charlemagne in *La Chanson de Roland*', *Viator*, 7 (1976), 123–39, but I failed to make that connection explicit.

[2] Stephen J. Harris, *Race and Ethnicity in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (New York, 2003), pp. 172–73.

millennium AD, in this part of Europe, this religion was Christianity. In respect to these self-evident generalizations, I believe that Harris and I are in agreement. If Harris wishes to claim, however, that the *Maldon* poet was exclusively subject to Christian influences or that the conventional numbers of his narrative have a Christian allegorical significance, then we have a debate on our hands.

Like *Beowulf*, the anonymous, stylized poem that we call *The Battle of Maldon* can plausibly be ascribed to the category of traditional narrative, even though it had an author; and traditional narrative as I conceive of it is a large category that encompasses more than Christian texts. It includes works, like the Grimms' fairy tales, that pertain to a Christian culture even if their overt religious content (with a few exceptions) is slight. It also includes works, like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, that could not possibly pertain to a Christian culture because they pre-date Christianity. Many fish swim in the ocean of narrative, and uncountable numbers of them pertain to cultures and ideologies other than Christianity.

Scholars such as the Danish medievalist and folklorist Axel Olrik and the Swiss literary scholar Max Lüthi have spoken of the predilection of authors working in the Western narrative tradition for certain conventional numbers such as three and twelve, Olrik with reference to what he called *Sage* literature (a category into which he put virtually all oral-performative genres) and Lüthi with reference to the Grimm-style *Märchen*.[3] Thus Olrik's *Dreizahlgesetz* 'Law of Three' recognizes the power of 'threeness' both in Christian thinking and in the world of Western narrative more generally, while Lüthi accounts for the favoritism for threes in fairy tales as one aspect of the abstract style of that genre, which also favours stark contrasts, flat characters, magical helpers, and so forth. The centrality of threeness in early Indo-European mythology and social structure has been set forth at length by Georges Dumézil, though the details of his analysis need no exposition here.

To put my point another way: there are the Holy Trinity, the Three Kings, and the Three Gifts of the Holy Spirit. There are also the three fates, the three blind mice, and the three heads in the well. Little is accomplished by interpreting the second group in terms of the first. At the same time, the two categories are not necessarily as exclusive of one another as one might think. Certainly the role of the three heads in the well, in the English fairy tale of that name,[4] is fully consistent with Christian ideals of faith, hope, and charity.

[3] References to the work of Olrik and Lüthi are to be found at p. 286, note 12.

[4] An early English chapbook version of this tale is reprinted in Iona Opie and Peter Opie, *The Classic Fairy Tales* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 156–61.

As for the *Maldon* poet, I visualize him (as I visualize the *Beowulf* poet) as a person who believed in the central truth and importance of Christian doctrine and was deeply influenced by his faith while also being open to the influence of images, ideas, conventions, and 'deep' narrative structures that may long have been in existence independently of Christianity, often reinforced by that faith and also, potentially, in a delicately subdued counterpoint with it. I doubt that for most readers this is a controversial claim. I am grateful to Professor Harris for having provoked me to express it more clearly.

How Scandinavian is the Name 'Odda'?

In a note published in 1998, Carole Hough rightly takes issue with my statement (in the article on which the preceding chapter is based) that 'Significantly, Odda, the father of the three brothers who are said to flee at Maldon, bears a name that is only slightly anglicized from its Scandinavian source, *Oddr*'. Hough points out that the Old English personal name **Odda* 'is securely evidenced in place-names' that are free from Viking influence.[5] In another note published the following year, John Insley confirms Hough's observation and, moreover, points out that no asterisk need be prefaced to that name, for it is attested in independent use in Æthelweard's late ninth-century Latin *Chronicon* (with reference to a ninth-century ealdorman of Devon) as well as in eleventh-century charters relating to Deerhurst, Somerset, a locale remote from Danish influence.[6] I therefore spoke too hastily in my article, and I have revised my language accordingly in that part of the preceding chapter where this name is discussed. I now refer to 'Odda' as a name that *could very easily be construed* as an anglicized form of the common Scandinavian personal name *Oddr* (p. 223 above), and my ensuing discussion is modified accordingly.

On the other hand, it can be seen that I do not think my point worth abandoning. I am troubled, in fact, when Insley states in peremptory fashion (with reference both to my article and to an article by Earl Anderson in which this argument was initially aired) that '*We do not need to waste time and space by discussing* recent suggestions that we are concerned with an anglicized form of ON *Oddi* [or *Oddr*]' (p. 4, my emphasis). The main reason why I do not consider an argument along these lines to be a waste of time is a statistical one. After all, if we are to arrive at an informed judgement as to what associations the name Odda

[5] Carole Hough, 'Odda in *The Battle of Maldon*', *Notes and Queries*, n.s., 45 (1998), 169–72.

[6] John Insley, 'Old English *Odda*', *Notes and Queries*, n.s., 46 (1999), 4–5.

might have had in the minds of an audience of Anglo-Saxons at around AD 1000, it seems reasonable to weigh the frequency with which that name is known to have functioned as an English one versus the frequency with which it is encountered in a firmly Scandinavian context. The two instances (leaving *Maldon* aside) where the name occurs in an English context, plus the place-name evidence cited by Hough, should be weighed against the very many instances where the names *Oddr* or *Oddi* are quite simply Scandinavian. I do not well know how to count the number of times the name Oddr occurs in the extant Old Norse records (including place-name evidence, such as Odda Sound, in the Limfjord, Jutland), but as a reader of the sagas I believe there are very many instances indeed. Moreover, some of the historical persons who bore this name were socially prominent members of their communities. Examples are Oddr Gottskálksson, the translator of the New Testament, or the Oddi who was the founder of the great Icelandic dynasty of the Oddaverjar ('men of Oddi') of whom Sæmundr the Learned (1056–1133) is the best known, or Oddr Snorrason, the twelfth-century author of a now-lost Latin original of *Yngvars saga víðførla* ('The Saga of Yngvarr the Far-traveller'). Doubtless the person of that name who is most famous today is the legendary hero Qrvar-Oddr, the protagonist of the *fornaldarsaga* known as *Qrvar-Odds saga* ('The Saga of Arrow-Oddr'). These instances are culled from a brief consultation of *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, and there seems to be little point in amassing additional references from the vast saga and chronicle literature and from the poetry of the skalds (e.g. the Norwegian skald Oddr Kíkinaskáld, whose verses are quoted by Snorri Sturluson on several occasions).[7]

It therefore seems reasonable to infer that when the *Maldon* poet singles out by name, as notorious cowards, three brothers who are sons of 'Odda', in a poem that pertains geographically to the former Danelaw and temporally to the period very close to the year 1000, the members of his audience might very well have associated that name with the population of anglicized Danes who were a problem element for the English at that time. The suggestion that Anderson and I make in this regard is made more plausible than it might otherwise be by the fact (cited in a footnote to my article) that in his account of the events of the year 993, John of Worcester specifies that the three English leaders who fled during a campaign near

[7] In ch. 35 of *Magnúss saga ins Góða* ('The Saga of Magnús the Good') and ch. 28 of *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar* ('The Saga of Harald Sigurtharson'): Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*, trans. by Lee M. Hollander (Austin, 1964), pp. 574 and 599, respectively. My earlier reference to Odda Sound is likewise drawn from this volume at p. 26, where reference is made (in ch. 24 of *Ynglinga saga*) to a fleet of Swedish Vikings that lay in wait there.

the mouth of the Humber did so 'because they were Danes on their father's side'. Moreover, one of these fugitives is named Godwine, like one of the fugitives in *The Battle of Maldon*, so this parallel is not an idle one (though it is ignored by Hough and Insley, whose articles are concerned with onomastics rather than literary studies). Did John of Worcester know something that the *Maldon* poet knew, but did not choose to be specific about? Or, conceivably, was John of Worcester influenced by knowledge of *The Battle of Maldon* (or some other source, now lost, that likewise spoke of 'Odda' as the father of some fugitives), and did he assume that the man named 'Odda' was of Danish extraction? If so, we should not blame him overmuch, for his assumption would have been a natural one given how common that name was among men of Scandinavian descent.

In the end, what we are dealing with in this part of *The Battle of Maldon* is not a problem in onomastics per se, but rather a problem in literary analysis that can be abetted by a judicious, and accurate, use of onomastic information. Hough and Insley have my thanks for their correctives in that regard.

Is Maldon *Propagandistic?*

A third point relating to my essay '*Maldon* and Mythopoesis' should perhaps be clarified, for it is easily misunderstood. At one juncture in a perceptive article on *The Battle of Maldon*, Michael Matto (while making a sympathetic paraphrase of my argument, for which I am grateful) states that 'he [Niles] argues persuasively that, read in its historical context, the poem works as propaganda not for continued military resistance to the Vikings, as is generally assumed, but instead for acceptance of Æthelred's later policy of paying them tribute'.[8]

The word 'propaganda', however, is not one that I favour in this connection. 'Propaganda' implies the self-conscious broadcasting of information by persons seeking to win over public opinion to their side. A propagandistic intent might well be attributed to the A version of the *Chronicle* (the Parker Chronicle), with its West Saxon bias and its nationalist agenda, or to the *Liber Eliensis*, with its local bias and its monastic investments, but not to the *Maldon* poet. It is precisely to avoid implications of self-conscious propagandistic intent on the part of that unknown poet (or his unknown patron or patrons) that I have preferred to speak of *Maldon* in terms of myth, seen as an embodiment of collective thinking. I have

[8] Michael Matto, 'A War of Containment: The Heroic Image in *The Battle of Maldon*', *Studia Neophilologica*, 74 (2002), 60–75 (p. 61).

also wished to call attention to the pain and shame that must have been occasioned by the English policy of appeasement. This shame, I believe, finds its compensatory opposite projected into this poem in the guise of the heroic ethos enacted by Byrhtnoth and his loyal retainers. The mechanism here is not propagandistic, but rather psychological, if one is justified in seeing this poem as helping to preserve a people's sense of self-worth in the midst of very trying circumstances. But that point is best explored in a separate excursus.

Excursus

On Sacrifice and Atonement

Particularly as it was first published in article form, the preceding chapter may seem to fall short of presenting a balanced approach to *The Battle of Maldon*. Writing against the grain of prior criticism about *Maldon*, I have argued that what that poem offers is not a call for violent resistance to the invaders who were making life very miserable, and peaceful life very expensive, for the English people towards the end of the first millennium AD, but rather a justification of sorts for the unhappy policy they had adopted of buying off the Vikings with Danegeld.

An analysis of the poem that aimed for greater balance would have put more emphasis on the inspirational example of Byrhtnoth in offering military resistance to the Viking invaders. In the preceding rewritten version of that article, therefore, I slightly modify my approach through reference to the concept of charismatic leadership. This is the notion that personal devotion to inspirational teachers can have a key role in the process of cultural transmission that we call 'education', particularly when those leaders suffer persecution, contumely, or death.

Byrhtnoth is presented as a charismatic leader. While it might be pointed out that he was not a teacher, but rather an ealdorman and warrior (and that point is perfectly valid), it is worth noting all the same that when he first appears on the scene at the beginning of that part of the poem that remains, he is presented quite specifically as a teacher of his less experienced troops:

> Ða þær Byrhtnoð ongan beornas trymian,
> rad ond rædde, rincum tæhte
> hu hi sceoldon standan and þone stede healdan,
> and bæd þæt hyra randan rihte heoldon,
> fæste mid folman, and ne forhtedon na. (lines 17–21)[1]

[1] Quotations of the text of *Maldon* in this section are taken from *The Battle of Maldon*, ed. by D. G. Scragg (Manchester, 1981), with asterisks omitted in the quotation at p. 246.

(Then Byrhtnoth began to draw up the warriors there; he rode and instructed them, he taught the men how they should stand and defend that ground, and he exhorted them to hold their shields properly, firmly in their fists, and never have the least fear.)

As the battle is joined in earnest and the wounded and the dead are falling, Byrhtnoth carries on in this same manner, offering his men support and instruction in the midst of the carnage:

> Stodon stædefæste, stihte hi Byrhtnoð,
> bæd þæt hyssa gehwylc hogode to wige
> þe on Denon wolde dom gefeohtan. (lines 127–29)

(The steadfast ones held firm; Byrhtnoth encouraged them, he urged that each warrior keep his mind focused on the battle if he wished to win glory from the Danes.)

Even after Byrhtnoth's death, his men continue to regard him as inspirational. A number of them imitate his example of fighting to the death, echoing his unfaltering words of courage and defiance, much as any acolyte might wish to imitate his master's example. The 'bad students' at the front drop out. Clearly the loyal retainers offer a model of devotion that is meant to be admired and even, perhaps, imitated by persons facing similar choices.

Neither one of these two contradictory ways of looking at *The Battle of Maldon*, however — whether as justifying the policy of appeasement that the English people found necessary, even if distasteful, or as providing a model of charismatic leadership for them to be inspired by — seems to me to account for the full force of Byrhtnoth's status as a quasi-sacral victim. What is still needed, I suggest, is a clearer understanding of this poem as a literary equivalent of the social rite of sacrifice.

The logic of sacrifice has not been explained in a clearer and more straightforward manner than by the French sociologists Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss in their study *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*.[2] Hubert and Mauss offer the

[2] Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*, trans. by W. D. Halls (Chicago, 1964), first published as *Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice* (1898). In one regard I follow the original essay rather than its English translation, and that is in adopting the French term *sacrifiant* over English 'sacrifier'. Although it is beyond my purpose to pursue the nature of sacrifice into the territory of comparative religion, the structuralist approach that Hubert and Mauss adopt is usefully supplemented by studies that take more fully into account the human context of sacrifice, especially in its occasional form (as opposed to its periodic form, as in the Easter liturgy). One wants to know, for example, what kinds of individual or collective crisis provoke a community to undertake sacrifice, as well as how sacrifice serves to re-establish social equilibrium. These issues are addressed by René Girard in his influential book *Violence and*

following observations concerning that ancient institution, which plays such a central role in Christianity and many other religions of the world:

> (1) There is a person or a collectivity, the *sacrifiant* 'sacrifier', to whom the benefits of sacrifice accrue.
>
> (2) There is an object, the victim, that is consecrated and offered up for destruction.
>
> (3) The act of sacrifice modifies the condition of the *sacrifiant*, or of certain objects with which that person or group is concerned.
>
> (4) The procedure of sacrifice universally consists in 'establishing a means of communication between the sacred and the profane worlds through the mediation of the victim; that is, of a thing that in the course of the ceremony is destroyed'.[3]

With these four points in mind, let us turn back to *The Battle of Maldon*. While this narrative poem is in no sense a 'ceremony', it has distinctly ceremonious qualities. Not only is it a stylized poetic production that exemplifies what elsewhere in this book is called 'ritualized discourse', but it also presents an analogue to ritual sacrifice.

Of course I do not mean to suggest that the narrative action of *Maldon* enacts a rite of sacrifice in a literal sense, for that argument would be absurd. Even though Byrhtnoth (together with some of his leading thegns) was a victim of this battle fought in AD 991, no one is marched to his death in the manner of a sacralized animal prepared for slaughter. No priest is present to conduct a rite of destruction on behalf of the community, nor are we told that Byrhtnoth's death (or the deaths of his men) alters the condition of the English in the least. What I wish to suggest is that the model of sacrifice that is advanced by Hubert and Mauss, and that is accepted in its general features by specialists in the sociology of religion, can lead to an understanding of the psycho-social dimension of *The Battle of Maldon*. It can help one understand the cultural work that was done by that poem during the period when it was received by its original audience or audiences. That work, I suggest, was to effect a change in the condition of the poem's

the Sacred, trans. by Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, 1977; first published in 1972 as *La violence et le sacré*). Girard takes the extreme position that 'violence and the sacred are one and the same thing' (p. 262). Following Hubert and Mauss, I view violence as something that, in certain ritual or quasi-ritual circumstances, is believed to trigger the release of sacred power; but the claim that violence *is that power itself* is one that ought to be resisted as either far-fetched or heretical depending on one's perspective. It is a dangerous claim either way.

[3] Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*, p. 97.

textual community through a vicarious act of atonement for the 'sins' and shameful deeds that the English were attributing to themselves during this disastrous period of their history. As for the nature of that textual community, I assume that what it consisted of were English-speaking men and women, living in the decades after 991, who were distressed by the breakdown of social order that had come about during their lifetimes and who, moreover, felt shame at the wholly ineffective policy of buying the peace that the English leadership, by common assent, had adopted.[4]

The affinities of *The Battle of Maldon* to sacrificial rites are particularly evident in the scene that presents the moment of Byrhtnoth's death. This event, which is the crucial midpoint of the poem and was perhaps its generative seed, exerts an organizational control over everything else that the poet mentions as surely as the geographical point known as 'magnetic north' brings the natural magnetic fields of the northern hemisphere into alignment. The moment of Byrhtnoth's death corresponds to the sacral moment when the victim of sacrifice is offered to the powers of the numinous world. For the duration of this long moment, all other narrative action is suspended:

> Ne mihte þa on fotum leng fæste gest[a]ndan;
> he to heofenum wlat:
> '[Ic] geþance þe, ðeoda Waldend,
> ealra þæra wynna þe ic on worulde gebad.
> Nu ic ah, milde Metod, mæste þearfe
> þæt þu minum gaste godes geunne,
> þæt min sawul to ðe siðian mote,
> on þin geweald, Þeoden engla,
> mid friþe ferian. Ic eom frymdi to þe
> þæt hi helsceaðan hynan ne moton.'
> Ða hine heowon hæðene scealcas,
> and begen þa beornas þe him big stodon,
> Ælfnoð and Wulmær, begen lagon,
> ða onemn hyra frean feorh gesealdon. (lines 171–84)

(He could no longer stand fast on his feet; he looked up to the heavens. 'I thank you, Ruler of the nations, for all the joys I have experienced in the world. Now, merciful Lord, I have the greatest need that you grant grace to my spirit so that my soul may be permitted to journey to you, to be borne in peace into your dominion, Lord of angels. I entreat you that hellish demons not be permitted to torment it.' — Then the heathen

[4] The most detailed contemporary documentation of the breakdown of law and order during this period is in the annals of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, as has been seen above. The most graphic evocation of it is in Archbishop Wulfstan's *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, to which I will shortly turn.

warriors cut him down, along with both the men who stood by him, Ælfnoth and Wulfmær, who gave up their lives beside their lord.)

With its solemn words of prayer, with the hero's hieractic posture (gazing directly upward), and with its spatial symmetry (as Byrhtnoth is cut down beside two warriors who seem to have no function other than to accompany him in death), this scene strikes me as one of the most ritualistic ones in Old English secular literature. Indeed, despite the fact that this is a war poem, the term 'secular' seems so out of place here that it is best left aside. As at the moment of death of a martyr in a saint's life, we are asked to contemplate a human soul *in extremis*, at the moment of its release from the flesh. Devils who might torment it hover round (*helsceaðan*, 180a), and yet one has the sense that the soul of Byrhtnoth, who is no saint but who was famed as a patron of Ely and a staunch defender of his homeland, Church, and nation, will find salvation.[5] It is hard to think of another moment in early English literature, even in the religious poetry, where the numinous presses so closely upon a scene of carnage and where the sacred and profane worlds are in such intimate contact. Essential to the meaning of *The Battle of Maldon* is that its central character, on whom all thoughts are focused at this moment, should not just be wounded and killed like an ordinary soldier falling in war, but that, as a flawed human being, he be consecrated (here through the pious words and the pious death that are attributed to him) in the manner of the sacrificial victims that Hubert and Mauss have described.[6] His fallible humanity must here be made visible so that it can then be transcended.

In any sacrifice, it is important that the victim be worthy. Byrhtnoth is of conspicuously high status. As an ealdorman he was only one rank below the king, and

[5] In 'God, Death, and Loyalty in *The Battle of Maldon*', in *J. R. R. Tolkien, Scholar and Storyteller*, ed. by Mary Salu and Robert T. Farrell (Ithaca, 1979), pp. 76–98, Fred C. Robinson has called attention to this scene and to Byrhtnoth's fear that minions of the devil will capture his soul upon its departure. Robinson plausibly sees here a reflection of the medieval idea that angels and devils can fight over a departing soul, with each group claiming the soul for its own. Moreover, in 'Old English Heroic Literature', in *Readings in Medieval Texts*, ed. by David Johnson and Elaine Treharne (Oxford, 2005), pp. 75–90, Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr, points out that 'when Byrhtnoth, dying, commends his soul to God, his words are an almost literal translation of a part of the (Latin) Office for the Dead as prescribed in the Roman Missal' (p. 89).

[6] See Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*, p. 35: 'Through this act of destruction [the act of killing the victim] the essential action of the sacrifice was accomplished. The victim was separated definitively from the profane world; it was *consecrated*, it was *sacrificed*, in the etymological sense of the word, and various languages gave the name *sanctification* to the act that brought that condition about.'

moreover he seems to have been one of the two or three chief ealdormen in England. By the usual logic of sacrifice, his 'offering' of himself must therefore be regarded as a worthy one. Moreover, in sacrifice, it is important that the victim (who is usually an animal) accept its status as a victim without obvious complaint. From the perspective of the *sacrifiant*, a victim's calm death is an exemplary one. As Hubert and Mauss note,

> For the most part it was wished that death should be prompt, and the passage of the victim from its earthly life to its divine one was hastened so as not to leave evil influences time to vitiate the sacrificial act. If the animal's cries were held to be bad omens, an attempt was made to stifle or prevent them.[7]

It is significant that, after the terrible hand-to-hand fighting in which Byrhtnoth is repeatedly wounded, being cut to pieces in a manner that calls to mind the physical dismemberment of a sacrificial victim,[8] he is shown to accept his death with equanimity. The death stroke that brings him down comes almost instantaneously, from some unknown hand. Nor do the two men who fall at Byrhtnoth's side seem to offer the least resistance to their fate. All we are told is that they too 'gave up their lives'. Unlike many other scenes in this narrative, the scene of Byrhtnoth's death lacks naturalistic verisimilitude, and for that reason it asks to be read in terms other than the literal.

The poem that we call *The Battle of Maldon* thus could be said to present an incident from the real history of this period in such a manner as to turn it into a surrogate form of sacrifice and atonement. From this perspective, the role of *sacrifiant* is played by none other than the community of English-speakers among whom this poem arose and whose mental and psychological disposition it embodies. Byrhtnoth is the chief victim, the 'object' that is consecrated and offered up for the benefit of the community. Other victims too are present (first of all Ælfnoth and Wulfmær, and then by extension all the English heroic dead), but it is only Byrhtnoth who is fully consecrated, as we have seen, at the moment of his

[7] Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice*, p. 34.

[8] Hubert and Mauss refer to sacrificial rites as performed at Methydrion in Arcadia, for example, where the rite ordained that 'the victim should be torn to pieces' (*Sacrifice*, p. 34); to the initiates of Bacchus (Dionysos), who 'tore to pieces their victims' (p. 37); and to ancient Hebrew sacrifice, where the victim was cut into pieces and the pieces brought to the officiating priest (p. 36). It was common knowledge that Byrhtnoth's head was severed from his body at Maldon and was not recovered by his compatriots. Byrhtnoth might also have lost his arm; at any rate he loses the use of it. Although the loss of his head is not mentioned in the poem as we have it, this gruesome detail might have had the effect of drawing the story of Byrhtnoth's death into the ambience of sacrifice.

soul's departure. The moment of Byrhtnoth's death — the consummation of the sacrifice — opens up a channel for communication between the divine world and the profane, as his soul goes forth to seek judgement. And the community benefits from this procedure of sacrifice through a process of vicarious atonement. The 'sins' that require atonement on the community's part are not just any ordinary sins; they are moral failings specifically associated with the military and spiritual collapse of the English people, and in particular of the warrior aristocracy, during the reign of Æthelred the Unready. The huge sums of silver that were used to buy off the Vikings during this period could not serve as atonement, for those sums could not be consecrated. What was needed was a worthy sacrifice made through blood, and that is what the poetic narrative of Byrhtnoth's death provides.

The term 'vicarious atonement' is a theological one. What it refers to is the doctrine whereby the sins of all human beings are cleansed through Christ the Redeemer:

> Man soon after his creation fell from grace, he has continued in a state of sin, and he is therefore by his own efforts unable to become reconciled with God. God, desiring the reconciliation of man, offers man pardon for his sins if man will make satisfaction for them. But man's offense to God's majesty is greater than any conceivable satisfaction he can give. Therefore God sent Jesus Christ to earth to reconcile man. As God, Jesus Christ can satisfy God, and as man He can take on the sins of man. By His life on earth, by His sufferings, and especially by His death on the cross, He satisfied God for the sins of man, and man, accepting his Redeemer, may enjoy the atonement Christ has bought.[9]

That is the familiar, orthodox Christian doctrine that underlies my special use of the term 'vicarious atonement' to refer to the sacralized death of Byrhtnoth. When speaking of 'sacrifice' in relation to that poem, I am thinking primarily not of the ancient Greek and Hebrew rites that Hubert and Mauss discuss, but rather of the model of atonement through Christ that lay immediately at hand for the people of Anglo-Saxon England. Sacrifice was offered, and vicarious atonement was made available for their benefit, every time the Eucharist was offered to believers. While *The Battle of Maldon* is not an allegory of Christ's redemption of humankind, its narrative is ineluctably dependent on that story, for all redemption is modelled on the example of Christ, who in turn is the type of all martyrs. To the extent that Byrhtnoth, that saint-like man, is shown accepting pain and martyrdom for the sake of his countrymen and their faith, he mediates between the divine world and the profane, offering vicarious atonement to his countrymen and, thereby, a chance to overcome their present afflictions.

[9] *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 2nd edn (New York, 1950), s.v. 'atonement'.

The need of the English people for atonement during these years is made clear in the pages of Wulfstan's *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos quando Dani maxime persecute sunt eos* (Sermon of the Wolf to the English when the Danes were most severely persecuting them). This famous sermon can be dated to the period AD 1009–14, that is, eighteen to twenty-three years after the battle at Maldon was fought. Bethurum refers to the *Sermo Lupi*, which survives in five manuscripts, as the 'best known of Wulfstan's works' and as 'one of the most impassioned'.[10] When compared with Wulfstan's other sermons, it is unusual in regard to the specificity with which it details the crimes and sins of the English. Too well known to need repeating are the author's references to repeated acts of cowardice and treachery, to the selling of countrymen overseas into slavery, and to sexual degradations of the most repugnant kind.

The part of the sermon that has a bearing on *Maldon* comes near its start, when Wulfstan establishes the intellectual framework for all that is to follow. Three times in this part of the sermon he reiterates the keyword *bōt*. While this noun has the general sense 'a making good', and while it can mean 'help, deliverance from spiritual woes' with specific reference to the Incarnation and Redemption, it is used here, two of the three times, in the sense 'atonement, penance, repentance for sins'.[11] After speaking of the devil and his works and of the evils that will beset the world before the coming of the Antichrist, Wulfstan laments the absence of truth and justice in the land:

> And næs na fela manna þe hogode ymbe þa bote swa georne swa man scolde, ac dæghwamlice man ihte yfel æfter oðrum, ond unriht arærde ond unlaga manega ealles to wide geond ealle þas ðeode. And we eac forðam habbað fela bersta ond bismra gebiden, ond gif we ænige bote gebidan sculon, þonne mote we þæt to Gode earnian bet þonne we ær þisum didon. Forðam mid micclum earnungum we geearnodon þa yrmða þe us onsittað, ond mid swiðe micelan earnungan we þa bote motan æt Gode geræcan gif hit sceal heonanforð gedigende wurðan.[12]
>
> (And there have not been many people who have set their minds on atonement (*bōt*) as eagerly as they should, but day after day, one ill deed after another has been performed and acts of injustice carried out and crimes committed, many of them, altogether too commonly throughout this whole nation. And for that cause we have also experienced many damages and disgraces, and if we shall live to see any deliverance (*bōt*) for them, then we must earn it better in the eyes of God than we have done before now. For with great deserts have we earned the miseries that afflict us, and with great deserts must we gain

[10] *The Homilies of Wulfstan*, ed. by Dorothy Bethurum (Oxford, 1957), pp. 355–56.

[11] *DOE*, s.v. *bōt*, first in that word's most general sense and then in senses A.1.b.iii and B.

[12] *Homilies of Wulfstan*, ed. by Bethurum, p. 261.

atonement (*bōt*) at the hands of God if this present state of affairs is henceforth to be overcome.)

While the sentiments expressed in this passage might be found appropriate to virtually any excoriation of a sinful populace, they have a specific historical basis in the confusion that resulted from Viking attacks on England during the decades of the 990s and 1000s. What the people of England are being told, most emphatically, is that their grievous troubles have arisen from their sins — an ancient topos in times of trouble, familiar from the pages of Gildas and Bede. They are also being told that they now have a strong need to seek atonement.[13]

The poem that we call *The Battle of Maldon*, I suggest, is an effort in that direction displaced into the symbolic medium of verse. No new sacrifice was called for; Byrhtnoth and many other good men had already shed their blood in Essex. Instead, a skilful poet, probably not working in this direction by conscious purpose, retold the story of this battle in such a manner that Byrhtnoth, with others of the heroic dead, could offer vicarious atonement for the English people more generally. In this poetic version of history, the men who died at Maldon are shown to make a pure, willing sacrifice of themselves, one that reaches its culmination in the dying Byrhtnoth's mediation with the divine. The logic of sacrifice affirms that such an act did not need to be repeated by others in the same terms. It did, however, need to be remembered by others, so that the full psychological effect of this act of 'martyrdom' could be felt again and again, whenever this poem was read or voiced aloud.

The manner in which I am now proposing to read the *Battle of Maldon* differs in some respects from the argument that is raised in the preceding chapter.[14] It is

[13] Anyone who doubts that this was a period in English and European history when the need to atone for sins was felt with some acuity is referred to Sarah Hamilton's study *The Practice of Penance 900–1050* (Woodbridge, 2001). Hamilton comments on the 'huge explosion' (p. 19) of evidence bearing on penitential practices during the century and a half that she takes into particular consideration, a period that spans the lifetimes of Byrhtnoth, the *Maldon* poet (one can assume), and Wulfstan.

[14] Readers may wish to compare my approach to *Maldon* with that of John M. Hill, 'The Sacrificial Synecdoche of Hands, Heads, and Arms in Anglo-Saxon Heroic Story', in *Naked before God: Uncovering the Body in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Benjamin C. Withers and Jonathan Wilcox (Morgantown, 2003), pp. 116–37. Hill sees reflections of the ancient myth of Tyr's loss of his right hand to the cosmic wolf, Fenrir, in the imagery of *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*, two poems in which, in his view, the pattern of pagan myth is adapted to Christian purposes and sacrificial power arises at those moments where the imagery of bodily dismemberment is introduced. As always, I find Hill's approach stimulating even when in disagreement about such points as the relative importance of northern mythology versus Christian belief in these poems.

a logical extension of that argument, however, rather than being something new or tangential. I still suggest that 'the pain and humiliation that attended England's appeasement of the Vikings' (p. 228 above) is the motivating force that brought this poem into being in the form that it has. I still find the poem a response to 'the pragmatics of violence and accommodation in a world that was spinning rapidly out of English control' (p. 236 above). What I see more clearly now is that this response takes the form of a surrogate sacrifice centred on the consecrated death of Byrhtnoth, a charismatic leader. The psychological effect of that imagined sacrifice, during the troubled years after much blood had been shed at Maldon, was to help the English achieve a form of vicarious atonement in a time of grievous need.

Chapter 6

Byrhtnoth's Laughter and the Poetics of Gesture

If the past is a foreign country, then those who seek it out take on the role of explorers in a half-known realm. We may approach that realm with the maps and compasses that previous explorers have devised and have bequeathed us, but we will do well to keep in mind that Greenwich meridian longitude may have no meaning to the people dwelling there. Those people may reckon the months by the position of the stars; they may count distances in terms of days on the road and may draw their own maps in the dust; they may measure land in terms of human need, not geometric acreage. Regardless of its familiarity, which paradoxically may diminish as our knowledge of it grows, any era of the past is best approached as an anthropologist might approach unfamiliar shores.[1]

There is nothing new about the problem of how to shed, as far as can be done, the conceptual biases of our own time and place so as to be able to penetrate the mental world of those people from other times and places whose culture we hope to understand. Consciousness of that problem does little to diminish it, however.[2]

An earlier version of the present chapter was published in *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. by Jonathan Wilcox. I wish to thank Professor Wilcox for his encouragement of my efforts to write seriously about laughter, as well as for the spirit of good humour that he has injected into the field of Anglo-Saxon studies on many occasions.

[1] This is an argument pursued by Aaron Gurevich, *Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages*, ed. by Jana Howlett (Chicago, 1992). I take it up it in a different way in '*Widsith*, the Goths, and the Anthropology of the Past' (pp. 73–109 above). The first sentence of the present essay alludes to David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985).

[2] Contributing to this tendency (as is noted in the previous chapter) has been scholarship that seeks to uncover the ideological bases of the popular and scholarly construction of the Middle

Any small question in literary interpretation — how to interpret the scene in which Byrhtnoth laughs out loud in *The Battle of Maldon*, for example — can soon take on the knottiness of a problem in cognitive anthropology or ethno-psychology. Moreover, attempts to solve such questions may well involve the study of a work's reception history, which itself is embroiled in larger trends affecting humanistic research in general, for answers to literary problems tend to differ over the years in keeping with those habits of thought that characterize the intellectual history of an era.[3] It is amazing how much trouble a laugh can be.

Studies of 'the medieval mind', if initiated now at all, are naturally undertaken more tentatively than in prior years.[4] As soon as one analyses that huge dark

Ages during the past centuries, e.g. Allen J. Frantzen, *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition* (New Brunswick, 1990); Norman F. Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages: The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1991); *From Medieval to Medievalism*, ed. by John Simons (New York, 1992); *Medievalism and the Modern Temper*, ed. by Stephen J. Nichols and R. Howard Bloch (Baltimore, 1996); and *Anglo-Saxonism*.

[3] To cite only basic studies in the areas touched on in this paragraph: Roy d'Andrade, *The Development of Cognitive Anthropology* (Cambridge, 1995), offers an introduction to cognitive anthropology with many bibliographical references but with almost no attention to the possible relevance of that field of research to medieval studies or literary studies. This is a topic that remains largely unexplored. Ethno-psychology is the concern of Catherine A. Lutz in her well-theorized book *Unnatural Emotions: Everyday Sentiments on a Micronesian Atoll and their Challenge to Western Theory* (Chicago, 1988). Drawing on fieldwork in the South Pacific, Lutz discusses emotions as culturally conditioned acts of communication that differ from group to group. A foundational study of reception theory is Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. by Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis, 1982). Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore, 1989), attempts to relate reception theory more closely to literary criticism.

[4] One important earlier work in this vein is Henry Osborn Taylor, *The Mediaeval Mind: A History of the Development of Thought and Emotion in the Middle Ages*, 2 vols, 4th edn (London, 1927). Taylor's assumptions concerning mind are largely unexamined. His concept of the Middle Ages, furthermore, leaves scant room either for Anglo-Saxon England or for non-elite modes of thought. For a stimulating set of essays on the anthropology of mind, see *Modes of Thought: Essays on Thinking in Western and Non-Western Societies*, ed. by Ruth Finnegan and Robin Horton (London, 1973). Archaeologically oriented perspectives are offered by Colin Renfrew, *Towards an Archaeology of Mind* (Cambridge, 1983), and are developed in supple detail by Ian Hodder, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1991). M. R. Godden, 'Anglo-Saxons on the Mind', in *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England: Studies Presented to Peter Clemoes on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. by Michael Lapidge and Helmut Gneuss (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 271–98, links the specific Old

cloudbank that has sometimes been called 'mind', it begins to dissolve into the myriad darting, glimmering, contradictory movements that together constitute 'the way people think'. As for that vast expanse of time and human experience that in our customary shorthand we refer to as 'the Middle Ages', it can take on a very different aspect depending on whether one is gazing on the mosaics of Ravenna, contemplating the theology of St Thomas Aquinas, or interpreting a literary representation of a battle in tenth-century Essex. Images and gestures that bear a particular sense in one context may be meaningless in another context or may signify something surprisingly different, as can happen today, for example, when an English-speaking person on holiday in Greece shakes his head 'no' to a question and then realizes, with some consternation, that he has signified an affirmative response.

How can we tell, today, how the Anglo-Saxons experienced laughter? Did they experience laughter, grief, impatience, anger, jealousy, lust, regret, and any of a number of other emotions as we do, or as we imagine that people of several generations ago did? Perhaps more importantly, did they display laughter or these other emotions in a similar way, using the same symbolic codes to achieve the same social effects? Did laughter have a place in the early English cultural system similar to what it enjoys among most people in the technologically advanced countries of the Western world today, having now come to seem so much a part of nature as to resist inspection?

These questions are not easily answered. The history and ethnography of emotions is a very large book that remains unwritten. No matter how alert we may be to the social construction of reality, including such apparently biological factors as human emotions,[5] we like to think of any other group of *Homo sapiens* as at least grossly analogous to us. They, too, ought to laugh when you tickle them. They ought to grieve when they suffer loss. They must fall in love, make love, have fun, feel shame, rage, boredom, and so on, all for close to the same reasons that

English vocabulary for the mind and for mental operations to psychological theories in the patristic tradition, while also exploring the possibility of a native English theory of mind.

[5] Peter L. Burger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York, 1967). Mary Douglas, 'Do Dogs Laugh?', in *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology*, 2nd edn (London, 1999), pp. 165–69, offers a brief but stimulating discussion of, first, laughter as an eruption of the body and, second, the body itself as a channel of communication between the individual and society. The cultural construction of emotion is addressed from an anthropological perspective by Lutz, *Unnatural Emotions*, and by Lutz and Lila Abu-Lughod, *Language and the Politics of Emotion* (Cambridge, 1990). I am grateful to John M. Hill for guiding me into this literature.

people do today, we are likely to assume. But can we be sure? Commonsensical ideas of a single unchanging human nature were swept aside some years ago by D. W. Robertson, Jr, who galvanized medieval studies with his denial that the people of the Middle Ages either thought or felt at all like people today.[6]

Robertson's point was a polemical one. He wished to stir medieval scholarship out of its then-current modes of criticism into a direction that was in alignment with patristic thinking, which he declared with some bravado to be virtually the sole basis of medieval literature and life. His sweeping claim about patristic thinking can easily be resisted. While his claim about human nature can be neither proved nor disproved, the denial of human nature is a useful ploy to the extent that it promotes scepticism about attitudes that may seem intuitive but that cannot be assumed to have universal validity. Humour, in particular, is a notoriously difficult thing to translate across linguistic barriers. Not just differences in language, but also incommensurate conceptual systems or psychological assumptions can cause a joke to fall flat. Who has not had the experience of trying to explain an in-joke to someone who comes from outside the group and so lacks the cultural competence that makes effortless communication possible?

Whether or not there exists such a thing as a single unchanging human nature, the ability to laugh seems to be a common feature of human experience, if not a universal one.[7] Certainly the Anglo-Saxons had a keen sense of play despite the

[6] Note particularly D. W. Robertson, Jr, *Chaucer's London* (New York, 1968), pp. 1–11. In his magisterial study *Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton, 1962), Robertson introduces this point briefly and builds on it at length, noting his indebtedness to J. H. van den Berg, *The Changing Nature of Man* (New York, 1961). In a stimulating essay published since the earlier version of the present chapter saw print, 'Did the Anglo-Saxons Have a Social Conscience Like Us?', *Anglia*, 121 (2003), 238–64, Eric G. Stanley poses the question of whether the Anglo-Saxons had concepts of pity, compassion, and mercy that correspond to modern ones. Without referring to Robertson's thesis (or to anthropological literature of the kind that is invoked in notes 3 and 5 above), Stanley concludes that 'The unchanging human heart, that it feels the same everywhere and in all ages, is a Romantic fallacy. Far from it: the emotions are not identical from country to country, nor constant from age to age' (p. 264).

[7] Whether laughter is universal is a moot point. When the coastal regions of central California were first explored and settled by people of European descent, for example, travel writers were struck by how sober the Ohlones of that region seemed, as if their ancient way of life or their severely circumscribed life in the missions had accustomed them to a resigned manner that found no place for humour or laughter. 'I have never seen one laugh', wrote one early visitor to Mission Dolores; 'A deep melancholy always clouds their faces', wrote another observer. Quotations from Malcolm Margolin, *The Ohlone Way: Indian Life in the San Francisco-Monterey Bay Area* (Berkeley, 1978), pp. 163–64. Douglas, 'Do Dogs Laugh?', p. 165, reviews several odd displays of

efforts of the clergy to keep that impulse under control. We should not assume that the people of the Middle Ages, unlike their modern counterparts, went about their business with dour faces all the time, whatever we may read in Ecclesiasticus 21. 23 about the loud laughter of the fool and in the *Rule of St Benedict* about monks' need to avoid excessive laughter.[8] After all, there are many types of laughter. A guffaw in the hall or a chuckle in the tavern may be construed differently from a hoot of laughter in the cloister. In Old English poetry, when images of ceremonious public interaction are called to mind, the life led by people of the ruling class is frequently animated by music and the sound of laughter. Well known are the scenes in *Beowulf* when the lyre is struck up in Heorot and the sounds of conviviality are heard:

> Đær wæs hæleþa hleahtor, hlyn swynsode,
> word wæron wynsume. (lines 611–12a)

(There the laughter of men arose; the noise of merriment resounded, words were a pleasure to hear.)

With their triple internal rhyme (on *hlyn*, *swyn-*, and *wyn-*), these lines enact the very cheerfulness that they describe. For the *Beowulf* poet, convivial joys are the essence of the life that is prized by the aristocracy, that charmed circle of men and women who seem never to have heard of dirt, sex, or the plough and who have their thoughts set on things other than the wisdom of Ecclesiasticus most of the time. Laughter in the hall is an index of contentment, peace, and plenty. Towards the end of *Beowulf*, when an unnamed messenger of the Gēatas brings news of the death of their beloved king, he expresses the significance of that loss in terms of the absence of music and laughter:

> Nu se herewisa hleahtor alegde,
> gamen ond gleodream. (lines 3020–21a)

(Now our lord has laid aside laughter, mirth, and the delight of instrumental music.)

laughter that have been observed by anthropologists in the field and notes that some tribes are said to be dour and laughterless while others laugh easily.

[8] On ecclesiastical opposition to disordered, riotous laughter, see Hugh Magennis, 'Images of Laughter in Old English Poetry, with Particular Attention to the *Hleahtor Wera* of *The Seafarer*', *ES*, 73 (1992), 193–204 (at pp. 198–200). The reference to Ecclesiasticus 21. 23 is to the work known in the Vulgate Bible as *Liber Iesu filii Sirach*. The verse in question reads, 'Fatuus in risu inaltat vocem suam / vir autem sapiens vix tacite ridebit' (The fool raises his voice when he laughs, but the wise man will smile quietly): *Biblia sacra juxta vulgatam versionem*, ed. by Robert Weber, 4th edn, ed. by Roger Gryson (Stuttgart, 1994), p. 1055.

The sound of laughter echoes throughout Old English poetry, as Hugh Magennis has pointed out in a brilliant essay on that topic, as Jonathan Wilcox has reiterated in a typology of humour in Old English literature, and as Jean Young remarked some while ago in her brief study 'Ungloomy Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Poetry'.[9] Young's article is a good one but it is oddly titled. In it the adjective 'ungloomy' is linguistically marked as one half of an implied pair. The corresponding unmarked adjective 'gloomy' thus takes on normative status for Old English verse. Readers of Young's article might conclude that there are only enough ungloomy things to be said about Anglo-Saxon poetry to fit into one short essay, whereas doom and gloom would require weighty tomes.

Were the Anglo-Saxons fun-deprived, then? Perhaps no more so than we moderns. In his book *Laughter and the Sense of Humour* (New York, 1956), the psychologist Edmund Bergler speaks of 'fun-deficiency' as a characteristically modern ailment — a product of either drudgery or a sense of ennui. To judge from those examples of Old English literature that are read with some frequency today, including *The Wanderer* with its joyless exile waiting for release from his earthly woes, *The Wife's Lament* with its cast-off woman forced to bide time in a dreary landscape, *Beowulf* with its succession of deaths and ceremonious funerals, Wulfstan's *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* with its diatribe against moral corruption, and — my own starting point in this essay — *The Battle of Maldon* with its evocation of savage warfare and heroic defeat, latter-day fun-deficiency would seem to have had its prototype in the unrelieved austerity of the Anglo-Saxon world. And yet when one scans the whole corpus of Old English literature, images of laughter, pleasure, and amusement abound. One may well ask to what extent the doom and gloom that are often assumed to have been the usual tenor of life in those times are products of the modern construction of Anglo-Saxon studies rather than something embedded in the Anglo-Saxon psyche itself. After all, it is we and not the early English who have canonized such works as I have named while neglecting any number of other works that are emotionally less austere, such as the riddles with their earthy play, the poem of the phoenix in its happy land, or the Advent lyrics with their mystical bliss.

Let me return to my starting point, then, so as to establish the ground on which the following discussion is based. No, I do not assume that there is such a

[9] Magennis, 'Images of Laughter'; Jonathan Wilcox, 'Anglo-Saxon Literary Humor: Towards a Taxonomy', *Thalia: Studies in Literary Humor*, 14 (1994), 9–20; Jean Young, '*Gléd Wæs Ic Gliwum* – Ungloomy Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Poetry', in *The Early Cultures of North-West Europe*, ed. by Cyril Fox and Bruce Dickins (Cambridge, 1950), pp. 275–87.

thing as human nature, but yes, I do think the Anglo-Saxons laughed as much as anyone else. Their palette of emotional responses to the stimuli of life was probably analogous to ours without being identical to it. To the extent that laughter is a social construction and a construable gesture rather than a function of biology, their laughter, considered as a sign, is bound to have had different meanings from ours, for their society itself was different in countless ways. These are the chief assumptions that govern my thinking, at any rate. They are no more than that. I suspect that Anatoly Liberman is probably not far from the truth when he concludes on linguistic grounds that the early Teutons 'were not stern, grim people fixed on heroic death and posthumous glory but normal men and women for whom life was primarily associated with joy and peace'.[10] Liberman is talking chiefly about prehistory, a period about which *die Gedanken sind frei*. We can make more confident assertions about the period after the conversion of the pagan English, when theologically grounded pessimism about the things of this world, combined with mind-body dualism that stressed the salvation of one's soul as the one goal worth pursuing, began to have a profound influence on whatever age-old structures of feeling had preceded the advent of Christianity. Aspects of this change must have been gradual, however. By definition, mentality is what remains chiefly unchanged while days and years swirl around it.[11] Structures of feeling do not dissolve and re-form overnight, especially in settings like Anglo-Saxon England where the mass of people had only a cursory acquaintance with the dominant language of literacy, Latin, and where no more than a small clerical elite read and wrote religious books. Still, if only by virtue of being written down, all Old English texts that have come down to us show the filtering effects of Christianity. Virtually every document from the early Middle Ages that we can read today is conditioned, to a greater or lesser degree, by the belief that lasting joy and peace are to be found in a realm other than daily life.

[10] Anatoly Liberman, *Word Heath 'Wortheide' Orðheiði: Essays on Germanic Literature and Usage* (Rome, 1994), p. 18.

[11] For example, Jacques Le Goff, in *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, 1980), refers to mentality as '"that which changes least" in historical evolution' (p. 229). I use the term 'structures of feeling', which derives from the writings of Raymond Williams, to denote those habits of sensibility, encompassing emotion as well as thought, that tend to remain stable over long periods of time despite changes in intellectual fashion. Williams defines his use of the term in *The Long Revolution* (New York, 1961), pp. 64–65, and develops it in ch. 9, 'Structures of Feeling', of *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977), as well as elsewhere in his writings. He tends to think of such structures in terms of a single generation rather than longer periods of time.

I have referred to Byrhtnoth and his laughter, however, and it is time to look at *The Battle of Maldon* more closely, reading it within the context of archaic narratives of a comparable type.

The Language of Things and Gestures

Readers of *The Battle of Maldon* may recall the dramatic moment when Ealdorman Byrhtnoth laughs aloud. At that moment in the action, as the unknown poet tells his tale with a vigour and an attention to physical detail that is unusual for the narrative poetry of this time, battle has been joined beside the River Pante between the Essex *fyrd* 'militia', headed by Byrhtnoth and his household retainers, and a powerful band of Viking raiders.[12] At first things have gone well for the English, who have the advantage of home ground and, very likely, superior numbers,[13] and who have kept the Vikings at bay over a causeway that separates the two forces. Then, in a tactical decision whose wisdom the narrator questions (lines 89–90), Byrhtnoth agrees to make room for the raiders on his own side of the river Pante so as to draw them into an open fight. While the ensuing battle rages around him, Byrhtnoth is wounded by a Viking spear. Aroused by this blow rather than intimidated by it, he manages to dislodge the spear from his body with a wrench of his shield. With casts or thrusts of his own two spears, he first kills the

[12] The poet calls the river the 'Pante' (68a, 97b). Modern scholars take it to be the Blackwater, a river that flows close by the town of Maldon in Essex and at high tide encircles Northey Island, which is thought to have served as the Vikings' base-camp during this part of their campaign. For this and other details concerning the poem and its historical context I draw chiefly on the essays included in *The Battle of Maldon AD 991*, ed. by Donald G. Scragg (Oxford, 1991). Additional essays, chiefly of a historical orientation, are included in *The Battle of Maldon: Fiction and Fact*, ed. by Janet Cooper (London, 1993). Five essays approaching *Maldon* from different critical perspectives are included in *Mediaevalia*, 17 (1994 for 1991), as part of a cluster on the topic 'History into Literature: Ideology, Values, and the Shaping of History in Narratives Relating to Tenth- and Eleventh-Century England' (pp. 1–176).

[13] Despite occasional claims in the scholarly literature to the effect that the English were outnumbered in the battle on which this poem is based, since they were on their own turf they may well have had far more troops at hand in their *folc* 'general army' (22a), as is noted at p. 218 above (with note 36). Whether Byrhtnoth's *heorðwerod* 'household band of warriors' (24a) was as large as the Vikings' powerful raiding party is another question and one that is more to the point. During this period as in many other times, we may assume, the outcome of a battle depended far more upon an army's professional skills and armaments than upon its numbers.

man who had wounded him and then strikes down a second Viking. He then pauses for a moment to laugh:

> Se eorl wæs þe bliþra,
> hloh þa, modi man, sæde metode þanc
> ðæs dægweorces þe him drihten forgeaf. (lines 146b–48)[14]
>
> (That made the warrior happier! He laughed out loud, that brave man; he gave thanks to God for the day's work that the Lord had given him.)

By laughing out loud in the midst of the fight, Byrhtnoth exemplifies a spirit of defiance like that shown by members of his household troops later on in the battle, as the Vikings push forward and, one by one, twelve named warriors pledge their intent to fight to the death despite their increasingly desperate situation (lines 205–324). Those later lines of the poem have often been admired as among the finest expressions of courage to be found in all of English literature. There is a crucial difference between that passage and the earlier one, however. The defiance shown by the twelve warriors is grounded in their knowledge of how desperate their situation is. No one among them is laughing. Byrhtnoth's laughter, which comes at an earlier stage of the action, is based on no such understanding. The ealdorman has no way of foreseeing that the English will lose the battle, that their casualties will be grievous, and that he himself will be the foremost among the slain.[15] In the very next lines of the poem (149–51) — he scarcely has time to blink — he receives a second, more terrible spear wound, and within another forty lines he is dead.

Byrhtnoth's laughter raises a troubling issue of interpretation. How are we to respond to this voiced gesture, this wordless vocal act? Is his laughter an index of happiness and well-being? One would not think so, seeing that he has just been wounded. Has one of his men cracked a joke? Not in our hearing. Anyway, humour and laughter are two different things and need not have any relation to one another. Is his laughter an ironic way of deflecting his pain, as when Adam of Bremen writes of the Danes of his own day, 'Tunc, cum dampnatus fuerit, aetum

[14] Dobbie, p. 11. In this chapter, citations of the text of *Maldon* refer to this edition (pp. 7–16).

[15] Since the end of the poem is lacking, there is no way to tell how the poet conceived of its exact outcome. Though not all sources are in agreement as to whether the battle was a victory or a defeat for the English, the relevant entry in the A version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* presents it as a defeat, while the CDEF versions specify that it led to a decision to pay the Vikings massive tribute in an attempt to forestall further raiding. See Janet M. Bately, 'The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*', in *Battle of Maldon AD 991*, ed. by Scragg, pp. 37–50.

esse gloria est' (When a man has been condemned [to death or slavery] it is his glory to put on a cheerful face)?[16] Perhaps so, but Byrhtnoth has not been condemned by any court or judge, and despite having been wounded he is still on his feet, fighting boldly. Does his laughter then express sardonic scorn for his enemies, whom elsewhere the narrator calls 'heathens' (*hæðene*, 181b) and 'wolves of slaughter' (*wælwulfas*, 96a), terms that imply their savagery compared with the English? Very likely yes, but again, we are left guessing. We are not told explicitly how Byrhtnoth views his enemies at this point, though somewhat earlier (lines 42–61) he has addressed them in a boldly dismissive speech.[17] Is his laughter akin to a martyr's laughter under torture, as when St Lawrence speaks 'with laughing mouth' (*mid hlihendum muðe*) when he is stoned to death, in Ælfric's homily on that saint?[18] Certainly Byrhtnoth gives thanks to God in almost the same breath as when he laughs (147b–48), thus showing his piety, and yet there is a crucial difference that sets him apart from the martyrs. Rather than suffering torture or death, he has been doing his best to deal death out.

Given these uncertainties, it is difficult to interpret Byrhtnoth's laughter or gauge it on a moral scale. Some readers might regard it as no more than an expression of the *ellen*, the fighting spirit, that is required of a hero in a tight situation or a saint whose zeal is being tried.[19] Other readers, particularly those of a Robertsonian persuasion, might take the laughter of Byrhtnoth, that *modi*[*g*] *man* (147a), as a sign of the *ofermod* for which he is famous: high pride, pride that is based on ignorance and that has no sense of consequences, what the Greeks called

[16] Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* 4:6, ed. by Bernard Schmeidler, Hamburgische Kirchengeschichte, Scriptores Rerum Germanicum, 29.2 (Hannover and Leipzig, 1917), p. 234; translation by R. I. Page, *Chronicles of the Vikings: Records, Memorials and Myths* (Toronto, 1995), p. 42.

[17] Both Edward B. Irving, Jr, 'The Heroic Style in *The Battle of Maldon*', *SPh*, 58 (1961), 457–67 (at pp. 460–61), and Earl R. Anderson, 'Flyting in the *Battle of Maldon*', *NM*, 71 (1970), 197–202, have stressed the masterful irony that is achieved through verbal echoes in Byrhtnoth's speech to the Viking messenger. Note also Wilcox, 'Anglo-Saxon Literary Humor', p. 11.

[18] See Magennis, 'Images of Laughter', p. 196 n. 9, for reference to this and a number of other instances when saints 'laugh heroically in their defiance of torture and suffering and in their scorn for their obdurate oppressors'.

[19] Peter Clemoes, *Interactions of Thought and Language in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, 1995), offers a brilliant discussion of *ellen* as 'the ingredient fundamental to the fighting capability of any being', a 'vital force [. . .] in itself devoid of moral implications' that was 'a sort of kinetic energy, functioning, as we would put it, through the nervous system, and, in humans, cooperating with, but not originating in, willpower and mental functions generally' (pp. 68–69).

hubris or, still more negatively, what patristic writers identified as the *superbia*, 'arrogance', that was the sin of Lucifer and the chief of the seven deadly sins.[20] As one can see, study of the scene that features Byrhtnoth's laughter modulates inescapably towards study of that famous earlier scene where Byrhtnoth, *for his ofermode* 'in his arrogance', or perhaps 'in his excessive confidence' (89b), yields *landes to fela* 'too much land' (90a) to the Vikings and allows them unhindered passage over the river Pante so that they may engage in a full fight.[21] For every reader of either scene who admires Byrhtnoth's irrepressible spirit, a second might be found who would question his wisdom. For most of us, I imagine, admiration for Byrhtnoth as a leader, sympathy for his cause, and doubts about his tactical wisdom coexist in an equipoise of tension.

The image of laughter here is thus a semiotically rich one. Its meaning, like the meaning of the *hleahtor wera* 'laughter of men' of *The Seafarer* that Magennis has analysed, is not easily translatable into words or reduced to a single formula, for it too represents 'a dynamic interaction of contrasting significances'.[22] By drawing on Magennis's authority to support this claim I do not mean to evade the issue of literary interpretation; rather, I mean to put it on solid ground. Like any symbol — like fire, or water, or money, or the Cross, each of which either kills or yields blessings depending on how it is used — laughter is a double-edged sword. Its nature, like that of the gods, is inherently ambiguous. Moreover, no one scene in which laughter occurs can be interpreted in isolation. Like any sign, laughter cannot function in the absence of a system of reference by which it can be construed. That system of reference (or those several systems, if more than one comes into play) has to be chosen by a reader or listener who thereby becomes complicit with the project of the poem.

Byrhtnoth's laughter serves as one of many instances in Old English poetry of the language of things and gestures. By this phrase I mean to refer to the tendency for abstract ideas to be expressed in terms of concrete images, material objects, and

[20] Hans Erik Andersen, *The Battle of Maldon: The Meaning, Dating and Historicity of an Old English Poem* (Copenhagen, 1991), pp. 64–65, raises, with inconclusive results, the possibility that Byrhtnoth's laughter is an instance of hubris.

[21] See Helmut Gneuss, '*The Battle of Maldon* 89: Byrhtnoth's *Ofermod* Once Again', *SPh*, 73 (1976), 117–37, taking issue with George Clark, '*The Battle of Maldon*: A Heroic Poem', *Speculum*, 43 (1968), 52–71. Godden, 'Anglo-Saxons on the Mind', p. 295, has pointed out that the semantic field of the word *mōd* in Old English literature frequently encompasses the idea of a 'dangerous, rebellious inner force'. The intensifying prefix *ofer-* magnifies that sense here.

[22] Magennis, 'Images of Laughter', p. 194.

bodily displays, in a system of signs that is supple enough to encompass a wide range of human experience.[23]

A good starting point for consideration of the language of things and gestures in archaic literature is chapter one of Jasper Griffin's book *Homer on Life and Death*. Griffin develops many insights into the narrative value of material things such as food, clothing, arms, and sceptres, as well as 'stylized and universally intelligible gestures' such as libations and gestures of supplication.[24] Laughter in most of its forms, though Griffin does not discuss it, falls into this latter category of stylized gestures, for despite its enigmatic potential it is often an intelligible index of either well-being or scorn. One instructive example of Homeric stylization is the motif of attendance. When a man of stature in the Homeric poems appears in public, as Michael Nagler has shown,[25] he is regularly accompanied by a pair of male attendants (or, if the leading figure is female, a pair of serving maids). The presence of a pair of attendants serves the function of auxesis: it marks out the attended person as important. Surely this is a motif drawn from life. In addition, however, the regular occurrence of Homeric attendants in pairs, governing a grammatically dual verb form, rather than as individuals or in groups of three or four or some unspecified number, must be construed as a literary topos. Since an important person almost never appears in public without an attendant pair, those scenes in Homer when a leading figure does appear alone are rhetorically 'marked' ones that are crucial to the development of the plot. An example of this tendency occurs at the beginning of Book 6 of the *Odyssey*, after Odysseus is washed up naked and alone on the shore of Phaiakia. There he meets the princess Nausikaa, whose attendants flee (6.137–40). Since Nausikaa is not only rich but also

[23] The subject of gesture is a large one that shades on one hand into drama and art history and on the other hand into kinesics as a branch of linguistics. The authors whose essays are included in *A Cultural History of Gesture from Antiquity to the Present Day*, ed. by Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg (Cambridge, 1991), offer many insights into the semiotics of gesture with a bibliography of that subject on pp. 253–60. J. A. Burrow, *Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge, 2002), discusses 'the smile' together with 'laughter' on pp. 76–81, with reference to particular scenes from Old French and Middle English literature. Also worth note is Gerard J. Brault's discussion of 'the gestural script' in his edition of *The Song of Roland*, 2 vols (Philadelphia, 1978), I, 111–15. Brault discusses conventional gestures that a performer of a *chanson de geste* might have mimed while presenting that work to a listening audience.

[24] Jasper Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford, 1980), ch. 1: 'Symbolic Scenes and Significant Objects', pp. 1–49 (p. 27).

[25] Michael N. Nagler, *Spontaneity and Tradition: A Study in the Oral Art of Homer* (Berkeley, 1974), in particular ch. 3, 'The Motif' (pp. 64–111).

charmingly nubile, the ensuing scene hums with sexual tension. One does not forget that only a short while before this encounter by the shore takes place, Odysseus has left the embraces of Calypso, the nymphomaniac goddess who has long blocked him from his return home to Ithaca and the faithful Penelope. To an uninitiated reader, the absence of attendants for either Odysseus or Nausikaa at this moment might seem to be an index of her danger in the presence of a potential sexual predator. In fact, it is more precisely an index of *his* renewed danger, from a narratological standpoint, for that same absence of retainers accents his need to act with the utmost delicacy if he is to fulfil the trajectory of his *nostos*, his return to his proper place in his own society.

The stylized motifs that are woven into the literary fabric of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are not necessarily unique to that literature; some of them can be traced elsewhere, as well, and can be numbered among the narrative devices that are available to almost any traditional storyteller.[26] The motif of attendance, for example, figures in *The Battle of Maldon* at a crucial moment. When Byrhtnoth is struck down in the passage that follows hard upon his laughter, he is killed 'not alone' — *οὐκ οἶος*, as Homer would have said — but in the company of two named retainers:

> Ða hine heowon hæðene scealcas
> ond begen þa beornas þe him big stodon,
> Ælfnoð ond Wulmær begen lagon,
> ða onemn hyra frean feorh gesealdon. (lines 181–84)

(Then the heathen warriors cut him down, together with both those warriors who stood beside him, Ælfnoth and Wulmær; both those men lay dead, having given up their lives alongside their lord.)

The device of auxesis can be recognized here. Byrhtnoth's stature in death, as well as the stature of those of his troops who remain loyal to him, is emphasized through the poet's deployment of the attendance motif, as readers of this passage are likely to recognize intuitively whether or not they are devotees of Homer.

Readers of the Old Icelandic sagas, similarly, soon develop competence in the semiotic system that is embodied in the imagery of that genre of prose narrative. Mention of a prominent article of clothing — the dark blue jacket that Skarpheðinn wears in chapter 92 of *Njál's Saga*, for example, or the dark blue tunic that he wears in chapter 120 — can prefigure a dramatic turn in the action. In the first

[26] In 'The Ideal Depiction of Charlemagne in *La Chanson de Roland*', *Viator* 7 (1976), 123–39, for example, I have traced certain workings of the motif of attendance.

instance, Skarpheðinn is about to kill his arch-enemy Þráinn Sigfússon; in the second, he is about to address a spectacular bit of verbal abuse to a windbag named Þorkell Braggart.[27] To be 'dressed to kill' is a modern English idiom that relates to that same semiotic code. In a similar fashion, when a man in the sagas speaks nothing but silently sharpens an axe, his silence speaks more eloquently than words. Such ominous motifs must be 'read' in a manner that most readers will find transparent. Skarpheðinn's sardonic grin, which is displayed in successive scenes towards the middle of *Njál's Saga* (in ch. 119, twice in ch. 120, and again in ch. 123), is a well-known example of the language of things and gestures. It always has a sinister effect, especially seeing how unattractive Skarpheðinn is said to be when he is first described: 'Hann var [...] liðr á nefi ok lá hátt tanngarðrinn, munnljótr nǫkkut' (He had a crooked nose and prominent teeth, which made him ugly around the mouth).[28]

Some readers of the Icelandic sagas might be inclined to compare Skarpheðinn's unpretty smile with Byrhtnoth's burst of laughter in *The Battle of Maldon*. Perhaps more aptly, looking to those earlier chapters in *Njál's Saga* that feature the first of the three marriages of the *femme fatale* Hallgerðr, readers may compare with Byrhtnoth's laughter Hallgerðr's odd hilarity at the time of her forced wedding to a nondescript man named Þorvaldr (ch. 10) or her equally curious laughter when she hears that her beloved second husband, Glúmr, has been killed (ch. 17). If these scenes from *Njál's Saga* are likened to the scene of Byrhtnoth's laughter in *The Battle of Maldon*, the differences between them should be kept in mind. Skarpheðinn is a heathen, as his very name implies without denoting (cf. Old Norse *heiðinn* 'heathen'). His grin, particularly when he displays it at the

[27] The 'blue tunic' motif in the Icelandic sagas is mentioned also by Page, *Chronicles of the Vikings*, p. 73. The motif of attendance can be traced in these scenes from *Njál's Saga*, as well. Njáll has three sons, not counting his illegitimate son Hoskuldr. They are (1) Skarpheðinn, the 'alpha' personality who dominates those scenes in which he appears, and (2 and 3) Grímr and Helgi, two subordinate figures who are scarcely differentiated from one another. Grímr and Helgi regularly accompany Skarpheðinn or another character as an attendant pair. In ch. 92, however, when the Njálssons set out from home to attack their arch-rival Þráinn Sigfússon, Skarpheðinn is accompanied by Helgi and by his brother-in-law Kári, both of them dressed splendidly for the occasion, as one might predict. Grímr is not mentioned here though he too is present on the expedition, for mention of him would destroy the motif of dual attendance. Such stylization is typical of the sagas. See *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavik, 1954), p. 231; *Njál's Saga*, trans. by Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (Harmondsworth, 1960), p. 201.

[28] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Sveinsson, p. 70; *Njál's Saga*, trans. by Magnusson and Pálsson, p. 83.

Althing in the context of his father's overtures for peace,[29] both masks and renders visible the implacable spirit of blood vengeance that wells up within him. As for Hallgerðr, she is a proud and self-willed woman. Her resentment knows no bounds when her fate is bandied about by men who ignore her own desires. Her sardonic laughter on such occasions both deflects her pain and encodes her determination to avenge her sorrows upon those who have wronged her. Though her laughter is enigmatic to those around her, to readers of the saga it speaks as eloquently as an axe being ground. Like Skarpheðinn's grin, it is the index of a desire for blood. Byrhtnoth, however, is a character of a different sort. As a pious Christian and one of the highest-ranking noblemen in the service of his king, he dies defending his land against a band of extortionist Vikings. His burst of laughter, like Skarpheðinn's grin or Hallgerðr's cold laugh, marks him out at once from people of a more ordinary stature or of a more bland or passive disposition, but there the resemblance between these figures ends.

To judge from these examples, laughter can signify a person's self-marking as someone to be reckoned with. A gesture of this kind asserts a person's claims to dominance, just as a spear that is raised above one's head signals the delivery of a formal speech. Although this latter image too is likely to be drawn from life, it has a literary integrity. Early in the action of *Beowulf*, the watchman who greets the Gēatas upon their arrival at the coast of Denmark raises his spear above his head to command attention, calling upon the visitors to declare the purpose of their visit (lines 235b–36). He thereby makes a claim to supremacy in whatever social interactions follow. When Beowulf then replies with decorous words, the conspicuous absence of any similar gesture on his part indicates his acceptance of a subordinate role in this exchange. Paradoxically, Beowulf's modest but firm manner of speech convinces both us and the watchman of his readiness to undertake an extremely challenging mission. In *The Battle of Maldon*, Byrhtnoth raises his shield and waves his spear in the air while uttering a defiant reply to the Vikings' request for tribute: 'bord hafenode, / wand wacne æsc' (he raised his shield, shook

[29] 'Njáll gekk þá heim til búðar ok mælti til sona sinna: "Nú er máli váru komit í gott efni. Vér erum menn sáttir ok fé allt komit í einn stað; skulu nú hvárirtveggju ganga til ok veita oðrum grið ok tryggðir. Vil ek nú biðja yðr, at þér spillið í engu um." Skarpheðinn strauk um ennit ok glotti í móti. Ganga þeir þá allir til lǫgréttu' (Njall walked back to his booth and said to his sons, 'Now our case has found a happy solution. We have been reconciled, and all the money is gathered together. Each side is now to go and pledge peace and good faith to the other. I want to ask of you now not to spoil this in any way.' Skarp-Hedin stroked his brow and grinned in reply. Then they all walked to the Court of Legislature): *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Sveinsson, p. 313; *Njál's Saga*, trans. by Magnusson and Pálsson, p. 255, with paragraph divisions deleted.

his pliant spear, 42b–43a). His gesture identifies him as a leader to be reckoned with. As a narrative marker, it also identifies him as the one figure in the poem on whom our attention as readers should be fixed. We can well expect him to be the Vikings' chief target in the fight that is to come.

Enough has been said to confirm that Old English poetry routinely draws on a pool of semantically rich images that are based on cultural values that are widely shared. These images give depth to what might otherwise seem to be neutral scenes.[30] In this regard, Old English poetry resembles the Homeric epics, the medieval Icelandic sagas, and — though I cannot well discuss it here — the traditional or folk poetry of modern times,[31] to mention only three bodies of literature out of many that could be cited. Reading those images in an apt manner, however, requires competence in the culture in question. It is my assumption that members of the upper ranks of Anglo-Saxon society routinely had such competence. These were people, I assume, who constituted an important textual community during the later Anglo-Saxon period, who patronized poets from time to time, and who would have been the *Maldon* poet's primary audience.[32] Such persons would have gained competence in poetry from an early age, whether from the

[30] I offer additional, though still brief, discussion of this point in 'Sign and Psyche in Old English Poetry', *American Journal of Semiotics*, 9 (1992), 11–25.

[31] In his book *Morning Dew and Roses: Nuance, Metaphor, and Meaning in Folksongs* (Urbana, 1995), the noted ballad scholar Barre Toelken has analysed the semantically rich images and metaphors that are often deployed in narrative songs of the British Isles and North America. References to the colour green, to milk-white hands, to the combing out of hair, and to the intertwined growth of roses and briars, for example, do not occur at random in the ballads; rather, they appear at strategic points in the narrative in accord with systems of signification that those who are competent in the conventions of this genre will recognize and comprehend. Toelken draws on the semiotically oriented work of Roger de V. Renwick, *English Folk Poetry: Structure and Meaning* (Philadelphia, 1980), as well as on George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's influential study of metaphor, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, 1980). Cf. my own study 'Symbolic Language in the Ballads', in *Semiotica 1986*, ed. by John Deely and Jonathan Evans (Lanham, 1987), pp. 33–42.

[32] I borrow the term 'textual community' from Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, 1983). Stock uses the term to designate a group of people who not only read texts but also talk about them. He concentrates on twelfth-century Europe and on textual communities centred on the Church or monastery. When turning to poems like *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*, however, one should keep in mind that during the period before the Conquest in England, textual communities may also have existed in non-clerical settings where the reading of literature was less important than the hearing of it.

process of reading it themselves or, more likely, from hearing others read or perform it aloud. If they ever talked with one another about such verse, as we can assume they sometimes did, then those occasions would have sharpened their discernment as members of a critical audience. Modern readers who are cut off from such processes of learning by the passage of centuries and by their own much more academic education are in a poorer position to gain such competence. However impressive the scholarship of our own time may be — and opinions on that topic vary curiously from age to age — knowledge gained through scholarly research inevitably represents a different competence from what is almost the birthright of people who are born into a culture and know it like the air they breathe.

How can we redress this situation? Is it possible to learn to read the language of things and gestures in early English poetry with the confidence of native speakers? Perhaps not, and yet the attempt can be instructive. To conclude this chapter, I shall turn again to a consideration of Byrhtnoth's laughter, taking a sharper glance now at critics' understanding of this scene.

Reading Maldon *146b–48*

Modern commentators on the scene that occupies the foreground of the present chapter seem to fall into two camps. In the first group are those readers who take Byrhtnoth's laughter as a straightforward expression of joy, a response to what, in his book *Taking Laughter Seriously*, the philosopher John Morreall has called a 'pleasant psychological shift'.[33] Certainly Byrhtnoth has just experienced such a shift. He has done well after an anxious moment, and the momentum of battle is apparently still on his side. Why should a Christian nobleman defending his home ground against a gang of pagan extortionists *not* laugh aloud after striking down several of them with what Stopford Brooke, writing with an enthusiasm that was still possible during the era of British and American imperial expansion, once called 'a good death-stroke'?[34] Susie Tucker, writing during the Cold War era, agrees with Brooke in essence, though her phrasing is more clinical. In her view, 'There is no hint of blame for Byrhtnoth when he has killed his enemy'.[35]

[33] John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany, 1983), p. 15.

[34] Stopford Brooke, *English Literature* (New York, 1877), quoted in *Maldon and Brunnanburh: Two Old English Songs of Battle*, ed. by Charles Langley Crow (Boston, 1897), p. xxiii.

[35] Susie I. Tucker, 'Laughter in Old English Literature', *Neoph*, 43 (1959), 222–26 (p. 224).

Other readers of *Maldon* have taken Byrhtnoth's laughter as a sign that all is not well in Essex. As we have seen, Byrhtnoth has just decided to grant the Vikings *landes to fela* 'too much land' (90a). He has made this choice out of *ofermod*, the poet specifies (89b), a word that notoriously denotes too much of a good thing. Courage and resolve have turned into recklessness, it seems. Byrhtnoth's laughter at this critical moment just after he has been wounded, long before the battle is resolved, seems of a piece with his earlier actions: his proud gesture when he brandishes his shield and shouts words of defiance, and his foolhardy decision to allow the Vikings to advance past the causeway.

In Western moral philosophy, laughter is often identified as a sudden eruption that is inconsistent with an enlightened spirituality.[36] Lord Chesterfield, placing as much emphasis on good manners as on enlightenment, wrote to his son in 1748, for example, 'Having mentioned laughter, I must particularly warn you against it [. . .]. Frequent and loud laughter is the characteristic of folly and ill manners [. . .]. In my mind, there is nothing so illiberal and so ill-bred as audible laughter.'[37] To accuse Byrhtnoth of ill breeding at the moment of his good death stroke would seem an unfair application of the standards of a more cultured age. Still, moral philosophy does not seem to be Byrhtnoth's strong suit, and that weakness should be explored. If his sudden burst of laughter expresses derision, then does it serve as a sign of his lack of enlightenment, even when measured according to tenth-century standards? In a footnote to an important article on *The Battle of Maldon*, Fred C. Robinson has suggested that like his rash decision to grant the Vikings unhindered passage across the Pante, Byrhtnoth's laughter is darkened by bitter irony, for it serves as 'a conventional dramatic signal that a mortal blow is imminent at the moment when the threatened person least expects it'.[38] Magennis, similarly, viewing this scene as an expression of 'exultant laughter at someone else's expense', cites it as a prime example of 'Laughter of Triumph, Hostility, and Scorn'[39] and notes that often, though not always, laughter of this

[36] Plato, for example, writes that people 'must not be overfond of laughter', for 'whenever anyone indulges in violent laughter, a violent change of mood is likely to follow': *The Republic* 3:338d, trans. by G. M. A. Grube (London, 1981), p. 67.

[37] Letter of 9 March 1748, quoted by Norman N. Holland, *Laughing: A Psychology of Humor* (Ithaca, NY, 1982), p. 15.

[38] Fred C. Robinson, 'God, Death, and Loyalty in *The Battle of Maldon*', in *J. R. R. Tolkien, Scholar and Storyteller*, ed. by Mary Salu and Robert T. Farrell (Ithaca, NY, 1974), pp. 76–98 (pp. 86–87, n. 33).

[39] Magennis, 'Images of Laughter', p. 195.

kind is based on ignorance of the true situation facing the laugher. If this line of thought is followed, then Byrhtnoth's laughter exemplifies his fatal flaw, his imperturbable arrogance, and could even be said to portend his death, which arrives almost as a form of retribution.

I have no wish to quarrel with this approach. As a narrative marker, a burst of laughter here is like a red flag signalling danger and inviting nemesis. 'Praise the fair day at even', runs the English proverb.[40] The author of the Eddic poem *Hávamál* expresses the same sentiment more sardonically in his own Norse tongue: 'At kveldi skal dag leyfa, / konu er brennd er' (Don't say, 'It's been a good day' till sundown. Don't say, 'She's a good wife' till she's buried).[41] Byrhtnoth is foolish to exult. His day's work is not yet done. In the next moment another Viking spear strikes him right through the body. This wound is no joke. Although a young English warrior pulls the spear from Byrhtnoth's side and hurls it back, striking that enemy down on the spot, two more Vikings advance and one of them wounds the ealdorman in the arm, causing his sword to fall to the ground. Aware at last of the terrible truth of his position, he gazes towards heaven and utters his last words in the form of a prayer for salvation, giving thanks to God for all the favours he has received over the course of his long life. Then he is struck down dead.

If one surveys Old English literature as a whole, most images of laughter are of this sardonic type.[42] Presiding over a feast in the poem *Judith*, the drunken Holofernes indulges in an orgy of mirth and laughter: 'hloh ond hlydde, hlynede ond dynede' (he laughed and whooped, he shouted and stormed, 23). His partying is ill-timed, given what we know about his impending fate. The Anglo-Saxons were well acquainted with cold-blooded laughter as well as such maniacal displays. In *The Battle of Brunanburh*, much as in the skaldic poetry that Aaron Gurevich has analyzed at some length,[43] laughter expresses exultant scorn. The northerners who

[40] Archer Taylor, *The Proverb and An Index to 'The Proverb'*, with an introduction by Wolfgang Mieder (Bern, 1985), pp. 26, 178–79; cf. 'An Index', p. 25. For additional discussion, see Taylor, '"In the Evening Praise the Day"', *Modern Language Notes*, 36 (1921), 115–18.

[41] *Hávamál*, ed. by David A. H. Evans, Viking Society for Northern Research, Text Series, 7 (London, 1986), verse 81 (at p. 55). Translation by Page, *Chronicles of the Vikings*, p. 144.

[42] Magennis, 'Images of Laughter', notes that besides being found frequently in Old English poetry, scornful laughter is also 'the most characteristic kind of laughter found in Old Norse and other heroic poetry and indeed in hagiography', as well as being 'the most common kind of laughter which occurs in the bible' and 'the only kind of laughter found in the [Old Saxon] *Heliand*'; see pp. 196–97, with abundant references in nn. 8–12.

[43] Gurevich, *Historical Anthropology*, ch. 8 ('On Heroes, Things, Gods and Laughter in Germanic Poetry'), pp. 122–76.

flee the battlefield with Constantine, king of the Scots, and Anlaf, leader of the Dublin-based Vikings, are said to have had 'no reason to laugh' that they came off better than the English in the fight (*hlehhan ne þorftun*, 47b). In an agonistic context of this kind, depriving one's enemies of the opportunity to laugh is as good as laughing at them oneself. In the northern world in general, laughter is usually directed against one's enemy or rival and is construed as an act of aggression.

According to J. C. Gregory, author of *The Nature of Laughter*, 'As laughter emerges with man from the mists of antiquity it seems to hold a dagger in its hand'.[44] Gregory may be thinking of the ancient biblical or Mediterranean world rather than the mists and moors outside Heorot, but his point holds true for the Germanic North as well. When we contemplate Grendel's inward laughter when he enters the doors of Heorot, we know ourselves to be in the presence of what Gregory calls 'the laughter of triumph — laughter in its most crude and brutal form'.[45] Grendel's mirth is given an ironic twist, however. As with Holofernes' mirth in *Judith*, the audience knows far more about the action that is in the process of unfolding than Grendel possibly can. When he pauses just inside the doors of Heorot shortly before his ill-fated encounter with Beowulf, Grendel casts his eyes over a roomful of sleeping men. His heart lights up: 'þa his mod ahlog' (then his spirit laughed within him, 730b). He would be less exultant if he had read the script of the play in which he is a leading actor. Here as elsewhere in *Beowulf*, an ironic dimension is opened up through the poet's exploitation of two different points of view: that of the actors in the narrative, who know no more than they see, and that of an enlightened person of later times, who can assess the responses of those actors in the light of a superior wisdom.[46]

When we read the scene of Byrhtnoth's laughter in *The Battle of Maldon* with an eye to the structural ironies of these passages from *Judith* and *Beowulf* and with attention also to the different, more favourable trajectory of battle in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, we can see that there is more to Byrhtnoth's laughter than defiance, scorn, and the hero's self-marking as a hero. Also built into the scene by the river Pante is a structural irony that derives from the coexistence of opposed perspectives. Byrhtnoth has tunnel vision. His quickness to exult in his temporary advantage uncomfortably reminds one of Holofernes prematurely celebrating his

[44] J. C. Gregory, *The Nature of Laughter* (New York, 1924), p. 13.

[45] Gregory, *Nature of Laughter*, p. 3.

[46] On dual perspectives in *Beowulf*, see particularly Marijane Osborn, 'The Great Feud: Scriptural History and Strife in *Beowulf*', *PMLA*, 93 (1978), 973–81.

nuptials or Grendel licking his chops at the prospect of a meal that he is not fated to enjoy. Byrhtnoth sees only one thing: another Viking down. As readers of the passage, we see the action from two contrasting perspectives. First, we are invited to identify with the actors in the poem, both Byrhtnoth and his followers, who suffer their small agonies with nearly superhuman grace. Second, we are required to keep some distance from those actors and judge them with wisdom that derives from hindsight, for we know more than they do about the course of events in which they are embroiled. Any reader of the poem must be aware that it was in this battle that Ealdorman Byrhtnoth met his death. Any reader of it or listener to it in former days must have known this as well. The losses suffered by the English forces at Maldon seem to have led directly to King Æthelred's decision to offer huge tribute to the Vikings so as to forestall further attacks.[47] It is hard to see how the audience of the poem, either now or in former times, could divest itself of this knowledge so as to view Byrhtnoth's laughter without misgivings about its appropriateness and timing.

If this reading is accepted and irony is to be perceived here, then a reader's understanding of Byrhtnoth's laughter must necessarily be somewhat detached. Although Byrhtnoth is a figure of piety and magnificence, he is in a fight whose wisdom can be debated, and he is unaware that the price for his courage will be his life.

What, though, are we to make of the people who figure in the poem as the imagined witnesses to this laughter? Do Byrhtnoth's men, fighting and dying beside him, share our superior wisdom and perceive their leader's mistake? Twelve named companions, among any number of other men, choose to stay at the front to avenge their leader whatever the consequences of this act may be. If they are imagined to share our wisdom, then their heroic choice is made problematic. It is one thing to lose your life for your leader; it is another to throw it away for a fool. But of course, these warriors do not share our perspective. They cannot have heard the narrator's criticism of Byrhtnoth's *ofermod*, nor can they be expected to be analyzing the poetics of a literary gesture that is slipping rapidly into the narrative past. They are too close to the action — they are the action itself — and each of them has his own job to do.

This conclusion leads to another question, however. If the warriors who die at the front are acting out their parts in ignorance and, like Byrhtnoth, are complicit in their own destruction, then must we not also view their heroics, like those of Byrhtnoth, from a detached and even ironic perspective?

[47] See *The Battle of Maldon*, ed. by D. G. Scragg (Manchester, 1981), p. 19 (quoted at p. 222 above, note 44).

This thought is a disturbing one. Almost all modern criticism of *Maldon* has taken a reverential view of the sacrifices made by the warriors who urge one another on, uttering mutual pledges to fight to the death. Irony, if admitted here, would force a radically anti-heroic reading of this part of the poem and would make a mockery of a long tradition of *Maldon* scholarship. Although at least one modern reader of *Maldon*, writing in the aftermath of the Vietnam conflict, has adopted such an anti-heroic perspective,[48] I do not urge readers down that rocky path. On the contrary, I assume that while Byrhtnoth's laughter is ambiguous, for it flamboyantly expresses the inseparable qualities of courage and arrogance that characterize his portrayal in this poem, the heroics of his men are to be viewed with unqualified respect. There is a balance of forces here, a push for every pull when it comes to audience sympathies. By the time that the fragment breaks off, in my view as in that of the vast majority of readers of this poem, any questions that have arisen earlier concerning Byrhtnoth's wisdom are subsumed in admiration for the loyal warriors and, indeed, for Byrhtnoth himself as the inspiration for their commitment to the highest standard of conduct.

Thomas's Saw

As the historian Keith Thomas has written, 'Those who study the past usually find themselves arriving at two contradictory conclusions. The first is that the past was very different from the present. The second is that it was very much the same.'[49] No historian or ethnographer is likely to be able to improve upon Thomas's commonsensical formulation of the dialectics of past and present, of 'us' and 'them'. The issues relating to human nature and the comparative study of mentality that were raised at the beginning of this chapter cannot well be resolved, for they are perennial ones. Anyway, why should interpretive issues be resolved in the direction of an imagined order that organizes our conceptions of the past or

[48] Heather Stuart, 'The Meaning of Maldon', *Neoph*, 66 (1982), 126–39. According to Stuart, not only does Byrhtnoth experience 'a desire for self-destruction' that arises from preoccupation with 'his own personal glory', his loyal thegns, too, 'behave like puppets' and remain 'trapped […] in their heroic fantasy' on a battlefield that is 'fast becoming a slaughter-ground' (pp. 130–35). In the end, what the poem thus depicts (claims Stuart) is 'man's ability to deceive himself' (p. 137).

[49] Keith Thomas, 'Introduction', in *Cultural History of Gesture*, ed. by Bremmer and Roodenburg, pp. 1–14 (at p. 10).

of a foreign culture so efficiently as to empty it of contradictions? Internal coherence we can perhaps discern in the mental world of other people, if we study them patiently enough. Why, though, should we look for greater consistency in a foreign culture than we generally experience in our own?

In *The Battle of Maldon* as in life as it is often experienced, there is a coherence to the scene-by-scene progression of sympathies that overrides the demands of strict consistency. In the early parts of the poem, the narrator establishes Byrhtnoth as a leader to be reckoned with, confident in his authority and respected by his men. He then ascribes to Byrhtnoth words of defiance that sting the Vikings into action and that articulate the collective pride of the English. Then, after some inconclusive skirmishing and waiting, the unexpected happens. In a moment of bravado, Byrhtnoth clears room for the Vikings on his own side of the Pante so as to meet them in a general fight. As the narrator makes clear, his decision is a foolhardy one. Once that fatal step is taken, however, Byrhtnoth's unflinching conduct in the battle, the pathos of his wounds, and the heroic efforts of his retainers to avenge him[50] all serve to identify him as a true hero, the finest that we know of from that era. The dying Byrhtnoth's prayer to God for the safe conduct of his soul, finally, invites our admiration and sympathy and encourages our own prayers for his salvation as nothing else in the poem can do.

Byrhtnoth's laughter, then — that sudden outburst of *ofermod*, the excess of uncrushable spirit for which that leader is famed — sums up the spirit of *Maldon* in a single image. His laughter is a gesture that expresses what the nature of heroism is, in the eyes of ordinary humanity: *it is what both attracts and repels us when a person is resolute in pursuit of a cause that is noble, even if hopeless or misguided*. Byrhtnoth's gesture emblematizes the nature of laughter itself as a form of resistance to the tyranny of reason, compassion, moderation, and good sense. As readers of the poem, having absorbed its contradictory messages, we may come away satisfied that the triumphs and agonies of heroic action have been figured in literature with a precision that merits respect.

If we look for other answers to the question of the meaning of Byrhtnoth's laughter, we are likely to be led astray by cultural assumptions that cling like burrs to our present-day vocabulary and mode of thought, however much we would like to shed them. At best, by offering a literary interpretation of such a poem as *The*

[50] It is this desire for vengeance, rather than any putative death wish, that the poet repeatedly emphasizes, unlike those modern critics who speak of the warriors' 'suicidal' impulse. See pp. 228–36 above.

Battle of Maldon — that is, by retelling its story in terms that make sense in our own time and place, as I have done in parts of this chapter — we will be doing little more than translating the efficient medieval poetics of things and gestures into the different and less potent language of contemporary prose. We will have gained a substitute for the poem, and in a few years the laugh will be on us.

Another Look at Byrhtnoth's Laughter

In the preceding chapter (p. 273), I write as follows concerning the response that an audience of Anglo-Saxons might have had to the moment of Byrhtnoth's laughter:

> Any reader of the poem must be aware that it was in this battle that Ealdorman Byrhtnoth met his death. Any reader of it or listener to it in former days must have known this as well. The losses suffered by the English forces at Maldon seem to have led directly to King Æthelred's decision to offer huge tribute to the Vikings so as to forestall further attacks. It is hard to see how the audience of the poem, either now or in former times, could divest itself of this knowledge so as to view Byrhtnoth's laughter without misgivings about its appropriateness and timing.

As sometimes happens whether in scholarship or life, I seem to have spoken too soon. A sympathetic reviewer of the volume of papers in which the present chapter first appeared, Gernot Wieland, has suggested to me that there may be a more positive way of viewing Byrhtnoth's laughter than the one that I have presented here.[1] Wieland's reading of this passage is based on the assumption that, when Byrhtnoth receives his first spear wound, he is aware that the wound will prove fatal. His subsequent heroic actions, including this burst of 'heroic laughter', issue from his knowledge that he is a doomed man. In a sense, Byrhtnoth has read the script of the play in which he is a leading actor, and his fortitude consists of his carrying through with that script with grimly buoyant spirits. 'Byrhtnoth laughs because as a man marked with death, he can see the incongruity in the situation in which a man about to die still can kill two attackers', Wieland suggests. Moreover, this laughter has an element of worldly detachment about it that is

[1] Personal communication of 1 August 2004. My quotations are from this source, published with Wieland's permission.

analogous to Troilus's famous laughter at the end of Chaucer's great romance *Troilus and Criseyde*: 'There is an element of "gallow's humour" in Byrhtnoth's laughter tinged with a Christian sense that this life is "vanity", and that he journeys into God's keeping.'

In a study of which I should have been aware when the earlier version of this chapter was published, Werner Habicht makes a similar claim while calling attention to Byrhtnoth's laughter as an example of 'das Lachen im Angesicht des Todes' (laughter in the face of death).[2] The most famous example of this motif in northern literature is Hǫgni's defiant laughter when put to death at Atli's command.[3] There is indeed a similarity here. On the other hand, one should not be so beguiled by these likenesses as to ignore what is distinct about each scene. Hǫgni is a pagan warrior who has been made captive. He has no means of physical defence, and he knows very well that he will die. Byrhtnoth is a devout Christian leader with responsibilities over a number of men whom he would like to lead home unwounded at the end of the day. He is still trying to win this fight. He laughs, but the reader or listener is left to infer what has inspired that reaction.

Manifestly, Wieland's and Habicht's perspectives on this scene could have been shared by any member of the poem's original audience who assumed that Byrhtnoth is aware of the deadly nature of his wound and is laughing in the face of death. While there is no way to prove this perspective to be a valid one, neither can it be shown to be invalid. I stand corrected on this point.

[2] Werner Habicht, *Die Gebärde in englischen Dichtungen des Mittelalters*, Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, n.s., 46 (Munich, 1959), p. 20.

[3] *Atlaqviða* 24:1; *Atlamál in Grœnlezko*, 62:5. *The Poetic Edda*, vol. I: *Heroic Poems*, ed. and trans. by Ursula Dronke (Oxford, 1969), p. 8 and p. 89, respectively.

Chapter 7

True Stories and Other Lies

Through their engagement with myths and myth-like narratives, it is widely believed, human beings are able to tap into the deeper resources of their lives as sentient individuals. One need not think of this spiritually enriching process in mystical terms. Rather, one can regard it as what naturally follows when, by internalizing a myth and reconceiving it in personal terms, an individual takes part in collective acts of mythopoesis that have involved many minds over long periods of time. Moreover, even though myths are often accorded a role in one or another programme of depth psychology or vision quest, they are not only of value as possible sources of personal enrichment. They are the most social of stories. A myth has no one author, and when the members of a society cultivate a myth, they rightly regard it as their common property, like a city square or a cathedral. Moreover, it is chiefly through myths and myth-like narratives that people confirm their identities as members not only of a given tribe or nation, but also of various smaller interlocking social groups, each one of which largely defines itself through the stories that it tells.

For those people who believe in them, myths are regarded as embodying a truth beyond truth, a sacred narrative so definitive that anyone who doubts its truth stands in danger of being regarded as a subversive or a heretic. At the same

The gist of this chapter was first presented at an international conference on storytelling held in Guadalajara, Spain, in June of 2001. Subsequent versions have been presented in Manchester, England; Berkeley, California; and Madison, Wisconsin. I am grateful to the persons present on these occasions for their comments, some of which have been incorporated into the present text. In addition, I wish to thank an anonymous reader of an earlier version of this chapter (written for *Myth in Early Northwest Europe*, ed. by Stephen O. Glosecki) for introducing me to the grammatical category known as evidentials.

time, the events portrayed in a myth are often so outrageously fantastic, when measured against the ordinary events of nature, that one may well find that if taken literally, a myth is patently absurd. Thus it is that in common parlance, a 'myth' is a false story or false belief: that is, it is a falsehood in which other people put their faith, and thus it is easily viewed as a dangerous lie that ought to be put down. One need not be surprised if debates between literalists and sceptics regarding the truth value of a myth sometimes become so intense as to erupt into violence, for much is at stake when foundational narratives like these are questioned.[1]

Myth wars of such a disastrous kind would never arise if myths are thought of as encoding truths rather than literally expressing them. Moreover, if all stories are thought of as potentially myth-like in their ability to encode truths, then there would seem to be no more reason to make war in defence of a myth than to do so in defence of a fairy tale, that most weightless of narrative genres. I suggest that there is both some practical value and much theoretical validity in reading myths, fairy tales, and many other genres of traditional narrative as different varieties of symbolic stories.[2] This is a comprehensive term that would excuse these narratives from the field of literalist debate at the same time as it would acknowledge their enormous potential for shaping human consciousness and guiding people's behaviour in the world.

If the main theme of this chapter were to be summarized in a single sentence, it would be as follows: *As a process of mythmaking, storytelling in general fulfils a vital role for both individuals and social groups through its ability to tell the truth through lies.* At a certain level of abstraction, it matters little whether a story is received as a lie, as with the fairy tale or tall tale; whether it is taken to be an account of what really happened, as with such genres as history or autobiography; or whether it exists in a realm that extends above and beyond ordinary truth-claims, as is true of myth in the primary sense of that term when, often conjoined with rite, it functions as sacred narrative. For in their essence, all stories are fabrications.

[1] 'Myth' in the sense of sacred narrative (as well as in other senses) is well addressed by Alan Dundes in the introduction to his anthology *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth* (Berkeley, 1984), as well as in a number of essays included in that volume.

[2] I borrow this term from Derek Brewer, *Symbolic Stories: Traditional Narratives of the Family Drama in English Literature* (Cambridge, 1980). Brewer extends his psychologically based analysis of symbolic stories to the nineteenth-century British novel, which he sees as deeply indebted to traditional fairy-tale patterns. Earlier in this volume I have written on Old English heroic poetry as constituting a kind of mythology for the Anglo-Saxons, providing models for conduct as well as anchor-points for their sense of collective identity.

All stories are myth-like in their ability to encode symbolic truths rather than simply being the truth. Whether we choose to label them 'fact' or 'fiction', all stories thus have the power, often associated with myth, to embody those principles by which human beings navigate the difficult terrain of their existence with a degree of safety and grace.

I realize that by speaking of the fabricated and symbolic nature of all narrative, I am raising a paradox, for a sharp distinction is often made between a statement that is truthful and one that is a lie. We all have an intuitive sense, for example, that certain events did happen in history while others did not, and so we are rightly filled with indignation when we feel that someone is twisting the historical record so as to serve a cynical end. In courts of law, similarly, the difference between the truth and a lie, declared under oath, may have a crucial effect on whether or not an accused person is allowed to go free. So no one can be so naive or so morally anaesthetized as to pretend that the distinction between truth and lies does not matter. All that I wish to claim is that all stories, regardless of their factual content, remain stories and can be read as encoded narratives. Moreover, all stories are socially embedded. No story can be tossed into the pool of human thought without causing ripples that have social effects. There is no story for which one cannot legitimately ask 'Who is telling this story, to what moral or intellectual end, and to whose profit or advantage?'.

On Oaths and Ordeals

As a medievalist, I have often been struck by the difference between the world that we inhabit today compared with the world of a thousand years ago regarding how assuredly we tend to proclaim judgements about questions of fact. Perhaps the confidence that we moderns have in our ability to discern facts is a function of our faith in science and technology. When a technician in a police laboratory, for example, convinces a jury that a defendant is guilty of a crime because a single thread of cloth of a certain composition was found on the floor of that person's car, then we are living in a different world indeed from, let us say, the world of Anglo-Saxon England. According to the earliest recorded English legal system, the trial of a person who was accused of having committed a serious crime would have relatively little place for forensic evidence.[3] What mattered was not exactly the answer to

[3] 'Relatively little' is of course a flexible phrase that is meant to leave room for instances where material evidence or documentary evidence did play a significant role in judicial proceedings. As

the question 'What happened?', for the people of that time did not necessarily assume the possibility of direct access to the truth. If both an accuser and a defendant swore to the validity of two irreconcilable stories, then what was required to resolve the dispute was the answer to the question, 'Does the defendant's oath carry sufficient weight?'. The crucial point to be determined was 'Which of the two parties has the power of speaking a "true" story?'.

This departure from current modes of thought as regards the workings of criminal justice is significant enough to deserve scrutiny. If the defendant in an Anglo-Saxon criminal proceeding swore to his innocence and his oath was legally worthy — if, in particular, enough people of high rank were willing to offer him what the early speakers of English called *mundbyrd* 'personal protection', thereby serving as sureties for his word — then the charges against that person would have to be dismissed, however plausible they might seem.[4] The oath-worthy defendant — in Old English, one who was *āþwurþe*[5] — was not to be included in the category of liars, and that was the end of the matter as long as no contradictory evidence backed by more powerful oath-swearers came to light. Complications arose when people lacked the legal right to defend themselves by oath. Any known perjurer fell into this category, as did a person who could not secure a sufficient number of persons to act as his sureties, whether because of his personal lack of trustworthiness or his lack of powerful connections. If the defendant's oath was not legally worthy, then the case would go to the next stage, which was that of the ordeal.[6]

Patrick Wormald has written in 'Charters, Law and the Settlement of Disputes in Anglo-Saxon England', in *The Settlement of Disputes in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. by Wendy Davies and Paul Fouracre (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 149–68, 'Oaths mattered, but so, to a much greater extent than hitherto appreciated, did what modern justice would consider evidence, and such evidence was preferably in writing' (p. 167).

[4] The standard definition of *mundbyrd* is 'protection, patronage, aid'; B-T, s.v. *mund-byrd* (sense I). The word can also mean 'the fine paid for a violation' of that protection (sense II). Often it appears in an abbreviated form, *mund*, which means literally 'a hand' (B-T, s.v. *mund*, sense I) and hence, by extension, 'protection' (sense III, a general one). As a legal term (sense IV) *mund* denotes the 'protection, guardianship' that is extended by a more powerful person to a person of lesser rank, for example by a king to his subject or a man of rank to his dependent. The metaphor here seems to be that of a person extending his hand over another person in a gesture of defence or shelter. On practical aspects of *mund*, including its specific monetary value, see further H. Munro Chadwick, *Studies on Anglo-Saxon Institutions* (Cambridge, 1905), pp. 115–26 and 153–56.

[5] See the *DOE*, s.v. *āþ-wurþe*.

[6] The Old English word *ordāl* or *ordēl*, referring to a particular kind of trial with a solemn religious aspect and physical rigours, derives from a common Germanic word that originally denoted

The logic of the ordeal, too, is worth inspection, for few aspects of early medieval life are more easily misunderstood and yet are so revealing of the mentality of that time. The judicial ordeal as it was known in Anglo-Saxon England had little resemblance to the 'wager by battle' so familiar from the pages of Malory or from stereotypical Hollywood representations of the Middle Ages. What made the Anglo-Saxon ordeal both a solemn liturgical occasion and a properly juridical event was the oath.[7]

In a trial by ordeal, the defendant would first have to swear to the truth of his story before God. After a suitable period of fasting and purification on the part of the defendant as well as other persons partial to the dispute, God would then be asked to test that oath through the spectacle of the ordeal. Most ordeals were by fire and were conducted in church in the presence of a priest or other representatives of the clergy, in addition to designated witnesses from either side of the dispute. In the ordeal by fire, the accused person would have to carry a red-hot bar of iron the distance of nine feet: that is, three strides, measured according to the person's natural pace. In an alternative procedure, the ordeal by hot water, the

'judgement' or 'judicial decision' in a general sense, as does the modern German reflex *Urteil* 'judgement, verdict, sentence'. See the *OED*, s.v. *ordeal*, and note further B-T, s.v. *ordāl*, where specifics concerning the Anglo-Saxon practice of the ordeal are given. The history and workings of the medieval judicial ordeal have been well surveyed by Robert Bartlett, *Trial by Fire and Water: The Medieval Judicial Ordeal* (Oxford, 1986). The textual evidence from Anglo-Saxon England, chiefly deriving from pontificals, can be found in *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, ed. by Felix Liebermann, 3 vols (Halle, 1903–16), I (1903), 386–429 and II (1906), 601–04. George Washington Rightmire, *The Law of England at the Norman Conquest* (Columbus, 1932), at pp. 46–51, offers a translation into modern English of three examples drawn from Liebermann, including an elaborate Latin 'Exorcism of Cold Water for Manifesting the Judgement of God' that was available for use during the period AD 850–975. Paul R. Hyams, 'Trial by Ordeal: The Key to Proof in the Early Common Law', in *On the Laws and Customs of England*, ed. by M. S. Arnold and others (Chapel Hill, 1981), pp. 90–126, discusses the rationale for the ordeal with attention to its legacy in English common law. D. A. Rollason, 'Two Anglo-Saxon Rituals: The Dedication of a Church and the Judicial Ordeal', Vaughan Papers in Adult Education, 33 (Leicester, 1988), discusses the varieties of the ordeal in Anglo-Saxon England with reference to its thorough-going liturgical character (at pp. 12–17). See also Rollason, in *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*, s.v. 'Ordeal' (pp. 345–46).

[7] Bartlett, *Trial by Fire and Water*, identifies the oath as 'the corner-stone of medieval judicial procedure' (p. 30). Some confusion can perhaps result, however, from his claim that 'exculpation by oath alone and exculpation by ordeal were mutually exclusive; hence, where oaths were unacceptable, the ordeal became a natural recourse' (p. 30). While this claim is literally true, it is important to keep in mind that the oath and the ordeal were not alternative forms of justice. Rather, the ordeal was an extension of the oath. It was a means of confirming a true oath or exposing a false oath through completion of a rite involving intense physical rigours.

defendant was to plunge one hand up to the wrist into a vat of boiling water so as to pluck out a superheated stone. If the person had indeed committed the crime and had thus also been guilty of swearing a false oath, then when his bandages were removed a few days later, his flesh would be blistered. This was God's manifest sign that he had lied. If he had truthfully affirmed his innocence, then his flesh would not be disfigured. That, whatever we may think of it today, was the basic premise underlying the institution of the ordeal by fire or hot water. Some trials required special measures. The rigours of the ordeal would be trebled for people of bad reputation, for example: the weight of the iron bar would be set at three pounds rather than one, or the stone would be set into boiling water at elbow's depth rather than wrist's depth.

Significantly, when the charge against the defendant was the capital one of witchcraft, the principle of *mundbyrd* apparently did not apply. The defence had to be by ordeal, and moreover, the ordeal was by cold water. This special form of the ordeal deserves particular attention, for it provides yet sharper insight into the mental world of the Anglo-Saxons. It too was preceded by the solemn ceremony of the oath, undertaken at the altar in the presence of a multitude of clergy and other witnesses. Then a suitable body of water would be ritually blessed and purified and, after appropriate scriptural texts had been read out loud,[8] the waters would be exhorted not to accept a perjurer or sinner. The defendant would then be lowered into the water with his or her limbs bound in a prescribed manner. Truth-tellers would be accepted into the pure, life-giving waters. A perjurer — that is, the witch, for the two were one — would float, rejected by this pure source. The malefactor whose guilt had been made manifest by this procedure would be fished out so as to be hung, while a person who had been proven innocent would be pulled out and set free. Again, that was the basic rationale for the ordeal by cold water. Even if God sometimes slept when heinous crimes were being committed, no one believed that He would turn a blind eye when a criminal was so brazen as to perjure himself when speaking a solemn vow at the altar.

These features of the Anglo-Saxon legal system are not cited here so as to call attention either to the barbarity of the people of that former age or to our own relative enlightenment, as happens so tediously when such comparisons are made. Rather,

[8] In the version of the ordeal by cold water cited by Rightmire, *Law of England*, pp. 46–51, these passages include selections from Deuteronomy, the letter to the Ephesians attributed to St Paul, and the Gospel of Mark. God is invoked as destroyer of iniquity through the Flood. Prayers used in this rite include adjurations of God as creator of the waters and Jesus Christ who was baptized in the river Jordan. This text is an instructive instance of the use of myth in life.

I wish to call attention to a difference of world view. For the Anglo-Saxons, human beings inhabited a world of conflicting stories. Only persons of high rank and unsullied reputation — or, failing that, only God himself — could be entrusted with the responsibility of distinguishing true stories from lies. As for ourselves in the more practical and scientific age in which we dwell, we perceive the world as consisting of facts that normally can be inferred by any person of sharp intelligence. Perhaps it is because we have grown so accustomed to lies in high places that we have come to make science and technology our gods. A test tube is therefore now entrusted with the high task of distinguishing fact from fiction in a court of law.

Of course, I am overstating a case. Perhaps the art of legal defence has not really changed a great deal since the Middle Ages, for if the potentially damning results of a forensic analysis are not embedded in a credible story complete with motives and a plausible plot, no judge or jury can be expected to convict. Thus it is that a modern trial, too, can assume the form of a rivalry of irreconcilable stories, one of which is told by the prosecution and the other by the defence.[9] At first, if the trial has not been poisoned by prejudice, both narratives simply have the status of 'stories'. Then, after all the evidence has been presented and all arguments have been heard, one of these opposed tales is declared to be the truth while the other is dismissed as a falsehood, and, accordingly, the defendant is either freed or punished.

With the passage of time in a notorious case, however, it sometimes happens that the narratives told by the defence and by the prosecution revert to their former status and again become no more than two conflicting stories whose merits can be debated. On occasion, a third story is found to account for the same 'facts' yet more efficiently, to the potential embarrassment of persons who were involved in the prior trial. So, leaving hot iron aside, perhaps what most sharply distinguishes the modern trial from its early medieval counterpart is its sociology rather than its substance. The modern trial by jury shows the results of social levelling, with a corresponding secularization of powers that once pertained to organized religion. In former days, the power of truth-telling was vested in the aristocracy as aided by God and the Church. Now it is vested in a judge or, alternatively, in a group of twelve ordinary citizens whose sympathies are wooed by lawyers competing with one another to concoct a story that will be found to have persuasive truth value.

[9] This is a point made with some verve by Sam Schrager, *The Trial Lawyer's Art* (Philadelphia, 1999); cf. W. Lance Bennett, 'Storytelling in Criminal Trials: A Model of Social Judgment', in *Memory, Identity, Community: The Idea of Narrative in the Human Sciences*, ed. by Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman (Albany, 1997), pp. 72–103.

Dueling World Views

Let me dwell for a moment on this issue of competing world views. For some while now, social scientists working in the anthropological tradition of Lévy-Bruhl, Boas, Lévi-Strauss, Goody, Ong, and other influential thinkers have spent much effort trying to ascertain the features of what has been called 'the primitive mind' or 'the savage mind' or, less prejudicially, 'the mentality' of people living in societies where literacy is not the norm.[10] Among Anglo-Saxonists, Edward B. Irving, Jr, is one respected critic who has drawn on scholarship in this vein so as to make sense of what are otherwise some puzzling features of *Beowulf*.[11]

One feature that has often drawn comment among scholars of this orientation is a tendency for unlettered people to polarize the elements of thought. Wisdom is diametrically opposed to folly, courage to cowardice, truth to falsehood, and so on. Reality itself tends to be viewed in terms of sets of binary pairs governed by what folklorists, following the Danish scholar Axel Olrik, have called the Law of Contrast.[12] Myths and fairy tales often embody this tendency in crystalline form, so that such qualities as 'good' and 'evil' are dichotomized with a vehemence that would never be tolerated in naturalistic modes of fiction. The classic Grimm-style fairy tale, for example, could be thought of as a narrative machine that rewards actions that conform to whatever is understood to be the social good, while contrary actions are punished with ruthless severity.

This 'primitive' delight in sharp binary oppositions can also be traced in 'advanced' thought, as well, although often in muted form. Libraries, for example, classify books first of all into one or the other of two exclusive categories, non-

[10] Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *L'âme primitive*, 2nd edn (Paris, 1927); Franz Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man*, 2nd edn with new foreword by Melville J. Herskovits (New York, 1963; first published 1911); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée sauvage* (Paris, 1962); Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge, 1977); Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York, 1982).

[11] Edward B. Irving, Jr, *Rereading Beowulf* (Philadelphia, 1989), pp. 16–30, drawing on the work of Walter J. Ong.

[12] Olrik formulated the 'Law of Contrast' (*das Gesetz der Gegensatzes*) in his influential study 'Epische Gesetze der Volksdichtung', *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*, 51 (1909), 1–12, trans. as 'Epic Laws of Folk Narrative', in *The Study of Folklore*, ed. by Alan Dundes (New Jersey, 1965), pp. 129–41. See further his *Principles for Oral Narrative Research*, trans. by Kirsten Wolf and Jody Jensen (Bloomington, 1992; first published 1921). Other persons writing on traditional, oral-based narrative have spoken of its fondness for stark contrasts, e.g. Max Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*, trans. by John D. Niles (Philadelphia, 1982), pp. 34–35.

fiction versus fiction. It is almost as if our librarians would have us deny either that works of history, biography, or autobiography can involve large elements of fiction,[13] or, conversely, that novels can tell the truth.[14]

The dualistic way of thinking about narrative as constituting either fact or fiction puts me in mind of a problem in logic that I first heard when I was a child. As I recall my father telling it, the puzzle went as follows:[15]

> An explorer was once travelling through a region of Africa where there only lived two tribes, the truth-tellers and the liars. The first tribe only told the truth. The other tribe only told lies. One day the explorer came to a fork in the road. One path, he knew, led to the village where he wished to spend the night. The other path led into a jungle where he might be lost forever. But he did not know which path was which. Now, there were two natives standing at this fork in the road, for it was the custom in this land for one truth-teller and one liar to guard each crossroad. But again, how could he tell which man was which? The explorer paused for a moment to reflect. He then asked one of the two men

[13] As the English author Jeanette Winterson, author of the memoir *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* (London, 1985), has remarked, 'There's no such thing as autobiography, there's only art and lies' (quotation from *The Times Literary Supplement Centenary Calendar* for the month of August 2002). In his study 'Oral Tradition: Do Storytellers Lie?', *Journal of Folklore Research*, 40 (2003), 215–32, the African folklorist Isidore Okpewho addresses the issue of truth in autobiographical storytelling from a different perspective, noting that the African storytellers whom he has tape-recorded sometimes weave their own lives into their fictive tales in obvious defiance of biographical fact.

[14] For example, the English novelist Henry Fielding, writing tongue in cheek, stresses the truth value of his fictions: 'Truth distinguishes our writings from those idle romances which are filled with monsters, the productions, not of nature, but of distempered brains': *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*, introd. by George Sherburn (New York, 1950), p. 106 (the preface to bk 4). The title of Fielding's novel is a playful reminiscence of the chapbooks of his day that cheerfully presented all manner of fiction under the droll rubric 'history', as in such titles as *The History of Friar Bacon*, *The Exact and Wonderful History of Mother Shipton*, or *The Famous History of Guy, Earl of Warwick*, to cite three titles from the Pepys collection. While Fielding's remark about the 'truth' of his novel is meant to be taken ironically, it also alludes to the fact that the *setting* of that novel is true to life in every regard, even if the plot is an invented one. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European realistic novel could be defined as a genre of 'lies in truth' or, to be more precise, 'truth-in-lies-in-truth'.

[15] My memory of the details of this story may have been influenced by a variety of factors over the years; in fact, it must have been changed in the retelling, seeing that we are in the realm of stories as internalized by sentient individuals. The present example is cited at the risk of violating the 'triviality barrier' that (as has been pointed out by the distinguished sociologist and folklorist Brian Sutton-Smith, 'Psychology of Childlore: The Triviality Barrier', *Western Folklore*, 29 (1970), 1–8) has tended to exclude children's games and stories from academic scrutiny.

> a single question. Satisfied with the answer, he then set out on the correct path, confident of his direction, and by nightfall he reached the village.

The puzzle that is to be solved is 'What question did the explorer pose?'.

For a child, the chief pleasure of this puzzle is likely to reside in the process of solving it. (There is in fact an answer, though I will hold it in abeyance for a while.) Any child who solves the puzzle correctly will have the satisfaction of knowing that his or her powers of ingenuity have prevailed in the face of a strenuous intellectual challenge.[16] Experts in symbolic logic, in turn, can divest the puzzle of its narrative colouring and treat it as a quasi-mathematical problem.[17]

When this same puzzle is contemplated from an adult humanist's perspective, however, it may present pleasures of a different kind. Let us suppose for a moment that the explorer is a rather dull-witted medievalist, and let us suppose that he failed to figure out the right question. He ended up taking the wrong path. Night fell. The jungle became more and more impenetrable. He heard the cries of strange animals, and the cries seemed to be coming closer. He tried to light a fire, but his matches sputtered and went out. Finally he found shelter in the hollow of a tree and fell into a restless sleep; but in the middle of the night. . . . But you are all storytellers. You can all find ways of completing the imagined plot that I have begun. As soon as one violates the rules of the game of the logical puzzle and breaks through into true narrative, then the number of 'correct answers' to the original problem becomes infinite. A great bird may transport the medievalist to

[16] Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore*, 4th edn (New York, 1998), reviews the categories of riddles in modern American life ('Riddles and Other Verbal Puzzles', pp. 113–35) and also discusses 'Mental Games' (pp. 486–88). Puzzles like the one cited here are best classified as deductive problems rather than true riddles. Folklorists therefore only rarely include them in their collections even though — in accord with the defining characteristic of folklore — these small narratives may be subject to free variation in oral tradition and print. Creative variations on the idea of there being two categories of persons, truth-tellers versus liars, can be found in various collections of brain-teasers and mind benders meant for both children and adults, e.g. *The Little Giant Encyclopedia of Mensa Mind Teasers*, ed. by Peter Gordon (New York, 2001), at p. 350 and pp. 379–80.

[17] The problem of 'Liars versus Truth-tellers' is a familiar one in logic. One classic formulation of it is A. Tarski's essay 'The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages', first published in Polish in 1933 and in German translation in 1935, with an English translation available in *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics*, 2nd edn, trans. by J. H. Woodger and ed. by J. Corcoran (Indianapolis, 1983), pp. 152–278. Working from a different perspective, the philosopher Bernard Williams offers a wide-ranging discussion of truth as a socially situated concept in *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton, 2002).

a tree that bears the golden apples of the sun. Alternatively, the man may stumble upon a Red Cross station from which a helicopter returns him to Nairobi. Or, if you prefer, snakes eat his eyes out and he wanders away blind, but then he is helped by a colony of ants and eventually becomes King of the Pygmies. As you can see, the mind's desire for narrative can easily overwhelm the problem in logic that was our starting point.

There are other ways, too, by which the same puzzle can beguile the imagination. A professional folklorist who studies this puzzle will soon be aware that it exists in multiple variants. As one of my former students has heard the tale, for example, there is no explorer. There is just a man who wants to return home after a long journey. As my teenage son once told it to me,[18] there is no African setting. Instead, the drama is set in a world of existential angst. A man is in prison in a room that has two doors and two guards. One of the guards is a truth-teller, while the other guard only tells lies. One of the doors leads to freedom, while the other door leads to a place of execution. The prisoner thinks for a minute, asks his one question, receives his answer, and then walks out the door that leads to freedom.

Obviously the brain-teaser that I first heard many years ago can take on many different narrative colourings at the same time as its core elements remain the same. It is thus an element of folklore, whatever else it may be. As professional folklorists know, it is the existence of multiple variants of an item, each one circulating independently of the other in informal transactions, that identifies it as an item of folklore.[19] Folklorists are therefore free to study a brain-teaser like this one just as they may wish to study any item of traditional lore, probing the details of each variant for their possible significance. Why did the people of my father's generation set the story in Africa, for example? Did that setting have to do with stereotypes pertaining to the era of European colonial expansion? Why do school-children in California now set the puzzle in a prison? Does that setting have anything to do with the fact that not many years ago, the State of California embarked upon an unprecedented programme of prison construction in response to a rise in the level of street crime, thereby creating a larger subpopulation of incarcerated criminals than ever before? In addition, does the theme of execution that has a prominent role in the prison variant of the puzzle have anything to do with the fact that human dramas hinging on the death penalty have been much

[18] Alan Niles, born 1983 in Oakland, California, and schooled chiefly in that region.

[19] Elliott Oring discusses the problem of defining folklore in the first chapter of his *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction* (Logan, 1986), pp. 1–22.

in the news in recent years in many parts of the United States? If other versions of the puzzle tell of a beautiful princess waiting behind one door and a hungry tiger poised behind the other (this is a version from the Ukraine),[20] or tell of a child who, while attempting to go home after the first day at a new school, is faced by twins of opposite character and by two streets, one of which leads through a dangerous neighbourhood (this is a version from Lisbon),[21] then what do these variants tell us about the psycho-social world that their respective narrators inhabit? Clearly the brain-teaser that I have posed can open up a wide range of questions relating to storytelling and society. It well illustrates the irrepressible desire for narrative that, strange as this suggestion may seem, must be regarded as an innate part of the human psyche.

A point that can be overlooked by scholars who devote themselves to the study of narrative without paying close attention to the language in which narratives are told is the key role played by the subjunctive mood of verbs in the practice of storytelling. Since this point is not an intuitive one, it deserves brief attention before we turn back to solve our small problem in logic.

Truth, Lies, and Evidentials

Just as the verbal systems of most European languages distinguish clearly between two types of verbal construction, the indicative mood and the subjunctive mood (otherwise called the optative), so too, many peoples of the world distinguish between two kinds of tales, the true and the false. Among some North American Indian tribes, as is well known, this dualism is reinforced by unspoken rules

[20] The source for this variant is a former student of mine at the University of California, Berkeley, Anna Remennik, who heard it in her native Ukraine in the 1980s. This version seems to have come into existence as the result of cross-breeding between the core problem posed by this brain-teaser and Frank Stockton's short story 'The Lady, or the Tiger?', in *The Best Short Stories of Frank R. Stockton* (New York, 1957), pp. 68–73. In Stockton's well-known story, there are no door-keepers and there is no question to be asked. Instead, all interest centres on the outcome of an internal war of jealousy and love. A princess who is the man's lover, and who is desperate to marry him herself, tips him off as to which of the two doors he should choose: but to which one has she directed him? Does she entrust his future to the lady who is her rival (and whom he must then marry forthwith), or to the hungry tiger? And does the man trust the princess enough to open the door that she indicates, or, fearing betrayal, does he choose the other one? We are left in the dark, pondering the mysteries of the human heart.

[21] This version was provided to me as a personal communication from Portuguese folklorist Francisco Vaz da Silva, to whom I am grateful for this courtesy.

regarding oral performance. 'True' stories about divine beings, saviour figures, and ancestral shamans are only told at night, in winter, among adult men. 'False' or 'funny' stories about the trickster figure Coyote are told for entertainment at any time.[22] In technologically advanced Western societies, no such strict distinctions are made, and yet we, too, distinguish between stories that we call 'history', or simply 'the truth', as opposed to fairy tales, tall tales, jokes, and other obvious fictions. We, too, are aware that a given type of story is suitable for a particular kind of occasion but not for others. Fairy tales are usually read or told to children at bedtime, for example, and are more likely to be told by women than by men. True stories relating to family history are often shared at family gatherings, often over meals when several generations are seated together, and no one would tell a fairy tale at such a time. Moreover, there is a rhetoric of storytelling that informs the reader or listener when 'false' stories are at hand. The classic Grimm-style *Märchen*, for example, begins with the tongue-in-cheek formula *Es war einmal* 'There was once' rather than with a phrase such as *Einmal war ich* 'Once I was', which would introduce an account meant to be taken as factual. The classic English fairy tale begins with the slightly more decorative formula 'Once upon a time'. What these formulas say and what they mean are two very different things. Clearly, what the German phrase really means is *Es war nimmer*, 'There never was'. Similarly, what the English formula signifies is that 'what is about to be told never happened and never *could* happen, not on this earth'. Listeners are thus immediately projected into a world whose truths are encoded in contrary-to-fact claims.[23] There is a narrative grammar at work here. Just as linguistic devices such as subjunctive verb inflections and

[22] This point is emphasized by Raphael Pettazzone, 'The Truth of Myth', repr. in *Sacred Narrative*, ed. by Dundes, pp. 98–109 (at p. 101) and first published in 1947–48.

[23] The fictionality of such tales is often brought out through their endings, as well. In Jack tales from the Southern Appalachians, for example, a tongue-in-cheek ending might run, 'The girl she went on home with Jack, and the last time I was down there they were all gettin' on right well': Richard Chase, *The Jack Tales* (Boston, 1943), p. 88. Many other tales in this same volume end in a similar way, including 'Hardy Hardhead' (a version of the international tale known as 'The Land and Water Ship'). Here we are told that the fabulous ship that has transported the hero as well on land as on sea is still in use: 'Jack's got it yet, I reckon. He's took me ridin' in it several times' (p. 105). As is pointed out by the American folklorist Roger Abrahams, *Afro-American Folktales: Stories from Black Traditions in the New World* (New York, 1985), this 'double lie' technique, which is commonplace in storytelling traditions around the world, underscores the wholly fictional nature of the tale by couching its narrative within an obvious prevarication. By this means 'the storyteller's reputation as an artful liar is enhanced' (p. 6). For a succinct introduction to Richard Chase and the Jack tales, see William E. Lightfoot, 'The Jack Tales', in *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by Jan Harold Brunvand (New York, 1996), pp. 399–400.

subject/verb inversions are used to signal hypothetical realities — might-have-beens, what-ifs, wish-that-there-weres, and so forth — so, similarly, the playfully formulaic incipits and explicits of traditional fairy tales serve rhetorically to mark off a tale as taking place in a heterocosmos, a world of the imagination.[24]

What seems to me curious is the quickness with which most people regard facts and the indicative mood of verbs with respect while devaluing fictions and the subjunctive mood as pertaining to a secondary reality that is somehow inferior to the first. This attitude has a linguistic basis, for every grammar 'marks' the subjunctive mood as a secondary category that only exists in the absence of the indicative mood, which functions as the 'unmarked' or normative one. Still, this asymmetry nourishes the anti-storytelling prejudice that can be traced in the writings of Western thinkers from Plato, in his more serious moods, through the Christian tradition of St Augustine of Hippo, all the way down to certain puritanical voices that are heard in the present day. According to this bias, true stories, such as the propositions made by philosophy and religion, ought to be the whole basis of learning, while *fabulae*, or 'fictions', ought to be banned from the educational system altogether.[25] The great Anglo-Saxon homilist Ælfric of Eynsham (*c.* 945–*c.* 1015), for example, contrasts true stories with *fabulae*, which he defines somewhat disparagingly as 'þa saga, þe menn secgað ongean gecynde, þæt ðe næfre ne gewearð ne gewurðan ne mæg' (tales that people tell, against nature, that never did take place and never can).[26] In his many sermons and saints' lives, Ælfric took pains never to write a narrative that might have been taken to be a *fabula.*

[24] I adopt the term 'heterocosmos' ('counterworld') from the vocabulary of K. K. Ruthven, *Critical Assumptions* (Cambridge, 1964). J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', in his *Tree and Leaf* (London, 1964), pp. 11–70, uses the term 'Secondary World' in a similar sense.

[25] A large literature has arisen concerning the medieval invention of fictionality, particularly with regard to the courtly literature of the High Middle Ages and the classical and medieval debate concerning the legitimacy of fiction as a category of writing. See e.g. Walter Haug, *Die Wahrheit der Fiktion: Studien zur weltlichen und geistlichen Literatur des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit* (Tübingen, 2003), esp. pt II, ch. 2, 'Die Entdeckung der Fiktionalität' (pp. 128–44). D. H. Green, *The Beginnings of Medieval Romance: Fact and Fiction, 1150–1220* (Cambridge, 2002), builds on this critical literature while writing about a period that is of crucial importance for the birth of the romance. I am grateful to C. Stephen Jaeger for these references.

[26] Julius Zupitza, *Ælfrics Grammatik und Glossar* (Berlin, 1880), p. 296. Ælfric's concept of *fabulae* derives, as so much in his thinking does, from the writings of Isidore of Seville, who distinguishes *fabulae*, as opposed to *historia* and *argumentum*, as stories 'quae nec factae sunt nec fieri possunt, quia contra naturam sunt': Isidore's *Etymologiae*, ed. by W. M. Lindsay, 2 vols (Oxford, 1911), I, bk 1, ch. 44, sec. 5.

A dualistic system of thought of this kind might seem less in keeping with the natural order of things if the grammar of English verbs included a category known as the 'evidential'. The linguist R. L. Trask defines the evidential as 'A grammatical category occurring in some languages by which all statements (and sometimes other sentence types) are overtly and obligatorily marked to indicate the source of the speaker's evidence for his/her utterance'.[27] Citing the research of William A. Foley into the Papuan language Fasu of New Guinea,[28] Trask points out that this language offers 'a particularly rich system [. . .] in which the English sentence *It's coming* has six distinct translations, distinguished as follows':

apere 'I see it'.
perarakae 'I hear it'.
pesareapo 'I infer it from other evidence'.
pesapakae 'Somebody says so, but I don't know who'.
pesaripo 'Somebody says so, and I know who'.
pesapi 'I suppose so'.

An evidential system of this kind provides the speaker with a 'hard-wired' means of expressing either commitment or disavowal when making any claim. Simple binarisms of truth versus fiction are thereby more readily avoided. While such a system does not disallow lying, it puts the onus on the speaker not to make a blanket statement about 'what is'. But for better or worse, no such system of verification is part of the grammar of English.

Indeed, rather than joining in the well-nigh universal chorus that would value truth over lies, a specialist in comparative folklore and mythology might well find reason to value these two contrasting terms in the opposite way. This point is well illustrated with reference to the writings of Zora Neale Hurston, an author who is esteemed as much for her achievements in folklore as in fiction-writing.[29]

In the late 1920s, while working on a graduate degree in Anthropology at Columbia University, Hurston drove south from New York City to revisit her home town, the all-black township of Eatonville, Florida. By collecting folklore there, she hoped to contribute to the effort being made by other intellectuals of her race

[27] R. L. Trask, *Dictionary of Grammatical Terms in Linguistics* (London, 1993); this and the following quotation are from p. 95.

[28] William A. Foley, *The Papuan Languages of New Guinea* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 165.

[29] Stephen D. Glazier, 'Hurston, Zora Neale (1891–1960)', in *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by Brunvand, pp. 381–82, presents a succinct account of Hurston's career with attention to her work as a folklorist.

to delineate what the African-American cultural activist W. E. B. Du Bois had called 'the souls of black folk'.[30] While talking with some men lounging in front of the one store in town (as she writes in the introductory pages to her book *Mules and Men*), she let them know that she was hoping to record old stories and tales. She received the following instructive reply: 'What you mean, Zora, them big old lies we tell when we're jus' sittin' around here on the store porch doin' nothin'?'[31]

She replied that yes, these 'lies' were precisely what she wanted. She knew very well that paradoxically, the symbolic narratives that the men called 'lies' would suit her purposes better than statements of fact could ever do. Soon one lie followed upon another in a verbal torrent. Stories about clever slaves who outwitted Ole Massa John were followed by Jack tales, animal fables, mock-serious origin myths, riddles, and other lore of all description. The loose term 'lies' by which these tales were categorically known concealed their importance in expressing essential features of African-American identity as that identity had been shaped during the Jim Crow years extending from the Reconstruction era to the onset of World War II.

As Hurston was aware, 'lies' that are casually told in informal circumstances can serve a myth-like function among the members of a community. Even when regarded as mere entertainment, such stories can serve as modelling devices by which people shape their lives and preserve their collective memory. Despite the anti-storytelling prejudice that always threatens to extinguish them,[32] fictions like these have long been a means by which people define their connections to their fellow human beings, to the numinous powers of the universe, and to the natural world in which they dwell.

Narratives and Progress

The more that scholars have learned about the role of narrative in the construction of reality, the more they have come to see that even the deepest beliefs of a people are formed and sustained through the stories that they tell, whether we call those stories facts or fictions. There can be no unmediated access to former times;

[30] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago, 1903).

[31] Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (1935; repr. New York, 1990), p. 8.

[32] I do not know of any systematic study of the anti-storytelling prejudice. In *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley, 1981), Jonas Barish analyses a comparable bias that caused the closing of the theatres in England during the middle years of the seventeenth century.

history is the set of stories that we choose to tell one another about the past.[33] In the sciences, similarly, the displacement of one major belief system by another that takes place during scientific revolutions can perhaps most fairly be regarded not as an advance in objective truth, but rather as the displacement of one master narrative by a more powerful one. One striking example of this process is the change from a Ptolemaic model of the universe to a Copernican model that was accomplished at the beginning of the modern era. Thomas Kuhn has described the Copernican revolution in terms of a change of scientific paradigms that bore along with it an entire change of world view.[34] Equally fairly, the change from a Ptolemaic to a Copernican model of the universe might be described in terms of two competing narratives, an older one that featured the earth as protagonist and a newer one that featured the sun. In time, the new cosmography tended to call into question a cluster of other narratives that featured God as hero, a role that soon came to seem less and less pertinent to scientific modes of investigation. Thus it came to pass that a change in narrative point of view undermined the authority of the most fundamental myth of medieval civilization in the West.

A similar example of a change in master narratives is the shift from gradualist models of the origin of the universe, which remained influential throughout the age of Darwinian evolutionary models, to the 'big-bang' theory that was developed by George Gamow and other scientists in the 1940s after first being proposed in the 1920s. In recent decades this story of the universe's origins seems to have become a new orthodoxy, buttressed perhaps by widespread post-Hiroshima speculations on the possible effects of nuclear or thermonuclear catastrophe. The 'big-bang' model of the origin of the universe is not a story that could have gained general acceptance until after the older creationist narratives that are enshrined in scripture, and that were called into question by both the Copernican and the Darwinian revolutions, had ceased to be a force to be reckoned with.[35] The cosmogonic myth that is

[33] A postmodern concept of historiography is propounded by William H. McNeill in *Mythistory and Other Essays* (Chicago, 1986), a book whose title makes playful allusion to the problem of how to separate true history from 'just another version of what happened'.

[34] Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Copernican Revolution: Planetary Astronomy in the Development of Western Thought* (Cambridge, MA, 1957), treats this example in detail, while his more comprehensive study *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edn (Chicago, 1970) addresses the system of such changes.

[35] In his memoir *Father and Son* (1907; repr. Gloucester, 1984), Edmund Gosse provides a brilliant portrait of the clash of Creationism and Darwinism in the thinking of a prominent natural scientist. This was his father, who was a fundamentalist Protestant for whom the scriptures were the Word of God. Gosse's father was one person for whom the claim that conflicting

accepted by most scientists today thus leaps back beyond Copernicus and Darwin into the Middle Ages, as it were, so as to yield a creation myth without a Creator.

Naturally one thinks of intellectual revolutions like these in terms of a progression from falsehood to truth. From a different perspective, what has happened is that one good story has displaced another, in a succession whose inner logic is usually apparent only through hindsight. The fields of psychology and literary criticism offer abundant examples of this tendency for strong stories to drive out weaker ones. If Sigmund Freud, for example, is remembered as perhaps the single most influential thinker of the twentieth century, his fame has little to do with the correctness of his theories in an objective sense. As with Darwin, Marx, and other epoch-making thinkers, it was as a storyteller that Freud chiefly made his mark. Freud's case histories stand on their own as spellbinding tales of quests and discoveries. They are stories that tend, of course, to celebrate the role of the individual analyst as hero. Freud himself sometimes rewrote his case histories in new ways in his later years, and subsequently those same stories have been retold again and again by other analysts and commentators, some of whom have portrayed Freud in a less flattering light.[36] This example suggests that psychoanalysis has something in common with literary criticism, for literary criticism, too, can be regarded as a metanarrative activity whereby one critic after another unlocks the meaning of a work by retelling it in terms that make sense among the members of a particular intellectual circle. The literary critic, too, is often poised to take on the role of a heroic guide signposting the wilderness (for example, the visionary poetry of William Blake or W. B. Yeats) so as to render its mysteries less obscure and forbidding. From a strictly phenomenological perspective, a literary text has no meaning that stands apart from the historical process of its interpretation. There is only an infinite regress of readings superimposed on readings, each one of which is the work of an able storyteller. While not all of us may be strict phenomenologists, any medievalist ought to be familiar with the process of appropriation

scientific explanations are no more than 'alternative stories about the universe' would have been intolerably relativistic. Recent books that view the history of science as a war of 'alternative stories' include John M. Staudenmaier, *Technology's Storytellers: Reweaving the Human Fabric* (Cambridge, MA, 1985) and Misia Landau, *Narratives of Human Evolution* (New Haven, 1991). Fifteen essays on the role of narrative in law, art, medicine, ethnography, and other fields are included in *Memory, Identity, Community*, ed. by Hinchman and Hinchman.

[36] The tendency to regard Freud's psychoanalytical writings as inherently narrative work, and to critique them in terms of narratology and literary theory, is reviewed by Dorrit Cohn, 'Freud's Case Histories and the Question of Fictionality', *Oxford German Studies*, 25 (1996), 1–23, with many references to recent scholarship along those lines.

whereby each era tends to interpret the literature of the past in the light of its own interests and investments.[37] Even though the truth value of any one reading of *Beowulf* or the *Song of Roland* (like the truth value of any one psychologist's reading of an individual's psyche) may seem perfectly adequate for a while, it is thus always subject to revaluation. Whether the sequence of such changes constitutes progress or not is sometimes difficult to say.

Living in the Subjunctive Mood

Despite appearances to the contrary, I have not forgotten that an answer was promised to the small brain-teaser that was put on exhibit above. To recall that puzzle, an explorer is faced with two paths. One leads to the village and safety, while the other leads to the jungle and, doubtless, a horrible death. Two natives stand at the crossroads. One is a truth-teller and the other is a liar, and by the rules of the game the explorer is permitted to ask only one question of one of the two men. So what question does he ask?

The solution to any riddle is easy once one knows it. As readers with training in logic may already have perceived, it does not matter to which of the two natives the explorer poses his question. What is essential is that he pose it along the following lines: 'Which path *would the other fellow say* is the one that leads to the village?'

That elegant solution is a tricky one. No straightforward question such as 'Which is the right path?' can possibly yield a life-saving answer. Instead, the imagined explorer must pose a complex question that depends on the presence of both the truth-teller and the liar. Let us assume that the village is located to the explorer's right, and let us further assume that it is the truth-teller to whom the question happens to be posed. The truth-teller will point to the explorer's *left*, for that is where the liar would point. Still assuming that the village is located to the right, and now assuming that it is the liar who answers the question, the liar too will point to the *left*, for he must lie about the truthful answer that the truth-teller would give if asked.

[37] Influential contributions to phenomenological or reader-response approaches to literary criticism include Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA, 1980); Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. by Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis, 1982); and Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore, 1984). Not every person who makes use of phenomenological approaches to literature, of course, would accept the solipsistic position that literary meaning is nothing but what it is perceived to be by an individual reader. What unites those critics who favour these approaches is the effort to address the indisputable fact that individual readers may have strikingly different perceptions of a literary work.

For the very same reasons, if the village is located to the *left*, then either native will point to the *right*. In other words, as long as the explorer sets out in a direction opposite to the one that is indicated, he is bound to reach the village safely.[38]

The main point to which I wish to call attention here, however, has to do not with logic or with happy explorers but with grammar. No linguist is required to inform us that the crucial question posed by the explorer must be phrased in the subjunctive mood: 'What would the other fellow say?' The only way the explorer can arrive at the truth, it seems, is to introduce a small fiction. Both he and his native interlocutor must imagine a situation that is contrary to fact. Furthermore, the puzzle that is posed has an absence at its core, for the 'other fellow' never actually has anything to say at all. He might therefore seem like a useless piece of furniture, some prop that is inessential to the action; and yet without his presence the puzzle could not be solved. So the other fellow is actually like the zero in mathematics. He is something with a value of 'nothing' that is at the same time all-important to one's calculations.

The little human drama in which this brain-teaser is clothed could thus be said to encode an existential lesson: namely, that we must learn to think in the subjunctive mood if we hope to save our lives. Moreover, despite Ælfric's and St Augustine's disapproval, we must think at times with some seriousness about things that have no existence in the 'real' world at all.

That, I suggest, is what storytellers regularly do. By telling tales, they are constantly asking us to think in the subjunctive mood about things that have no 'real' existence. The subjunctive mood is the mode of thought that the German philosopher Hans Vaihinger, the champion of 'fictionalism', celebrated in his seminal 1913 study *Die Philosophie des Als Ob*.[39] There Vaihinger pursued with a new degree of rigour a philosophical tradition that can be traced at least as far back as the fourteenth-century scholastic philosopher William of Ockham, who was unusual among medieval theologians in arguing for the pragmatic necessity of fictions.[40] William of Ockham granted philosophical legitimacy to an intellectual position

[38] In terms of logic, the questioner's task is to induce a response that involves both one true proposition and one false proposition. When taken together, the two propositions will always result in a false statement, regardless of whether a true statement is falsely negated or a lie is confirmed as such.

[39] Translated into English as *The Philosophy of 'As If': A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*, trans. by C. K. Ogden, 2nd edn (1935; repr. New York, 1968).

[40] Marilyn McCord Adams, *William Ockham*, 2 vols (Notre Dame, 1987), II, 73–107. Over the course of his career William engaged strenuously, and not always consistently, with the idea of the necessity of *ficta*, things that do not and cannot really exist.

that any storyteller is likely to accept through intuition: that is, that to deny the tyranny of fact can be a practical and even heroic activity.

Alone among the inhabitants of earth, it seems, human beings have the ability not only to signal to one another through one or another system of mimetic communication such as vocal cries and bodily movements, but also to employ the power of grammatically complex language to speak of things that do not exist. Many animals have the ability to communicate with one another. Frequently they do so in a vivid and effective fashion, particularly if food, or sex, or a physical challenge is at stake. Only *Homo sapiens*, alone among creatures that walk or swim or fly, has the ability to speak imagined worlds into existence. Once this breakthrough into visionary realms occurs, then sometimes, thanks to their technical ingenuity, people can actually begin to inhabit those realms, building edifices and making machines that have never existed before except in the realm of 'what if'. But the act of imagination must come first. It was first necessary for the great storyteller Jules Verne to write of fabulous undersea journeys before actual deep-sea divers and manned submarines could begin to probe the ocean depths.[41] It is the same now with expeditions to the moon and the planets, all of which were anticipated in the pages of science fiction long before scientists were able to launch the first rockets into space. As for such relatively novel features of the contemporary world (*c.* AD 2005) as cell phones, flat-wall viewing screens, and non-invasive surgery, they were anticipated fairly exactly in the enormously popular *Star Trek* television series that was first broadcast in 1964.[42]

In a recent book I have suggested that in view of human beings' remarkable storytelling ability, our species might fittingly be designated not *Homo sapiens* (for who is to say if our wisdom really surpasses that of the whales and bees?), but rather *Homo narrans*: the hominid who tells tales.[43] A linguist might even propose

[41] The French writer Jules Verne (1828–1905) was the author of the most influential novel on this theme, *Vingt mille lieus sous les mers*, first published in 1870 (see note 47 below).

[42] This point is discussed in two articles included on page E1 of *The San Francisco Chronicle* for 15 March 2004, under the heading 'Trek Tech', commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the broadcast of the first episode of *Star Trek*.

[43] See Abbreviations, s.v. *Homo Narrans*.In *The Folkstories of Children* (Philadelphia, 1981), Brian Sutton-Smith argues for a comparable approach to the growth of narrative competence among the young: 'The most basic human mind is a storytelling one. It envisages its life as episodes of excitement and drama, as villainy and deprivation and their nullification. It dreams of the rise and fall of heroes, ideologies, marriage, war, mortality, and biography. Onto this more basic mind stuff, the increasingly rational calculations of probabilism, strategy, and planning are subsequently grafted' (p. 37).

to call our species *Homo subjunctivus*, 'the hominid who uses the subjunctive mood', but that is a clumsy construction that is unlikely to win many votes. Still other people might opt for the name *Homo mendax*, 'the hominid who tells lies'. I have no quarrel with that last title as long as one keeps in mind that lies alone are not all we speak, nor do lies necessarily lead to any sojourner's path home. When truths are looked for in the political or moral sphere, for example, lies are not necessarily to be admired no matter how persuasive they may be. It is the storyteller's ability to encode truths to live by through tales of things that could never be that is a major creative achievement and a great gift to us all.

Two Truth-Bearing Lies

To provide adequate illustration of humankind's species-specific ability to fuse sophisticated grammar with strong mythmaking abilities would require a long summer's day. Fortunately, all of us are deeply enough schooled in lies to understand this point. To conclude my remarks, I will call attention to just two additional stories. Each is a truth-bearing lie. Moreover, each one illustrates the way that good stories tend to weave their way through long reaches of time, appearing in one guise in classical antiquity or during the Middle Ages and then reappearing, perhaps centuries or millennia later, in quite a different form.

The first example is a short, untitled narrative poem by the celebrated Irish poet Seamus Heaney, whose recent translation of *Beowulf* will be the topic of this book's concluding chapter. The poem appears as the eighth item in a series titled 'Lightenings' that is included in Heaney's collection *Seeing Things* (1991). Like many of Heaney's poems, it is part of a dialogue between the early Middle Ages and the present day, for what it represents is an artful retelling of a traditional tale that has a long pedigree going back to the Annals of Ulster for the year AD 748.[44] The poem reads as follows in its entirety:

[44] Miceal Ross, 'Anchors in a Three-Decker World', *Folklore*, 109 (1998), 63–75, assembles a number of analogues to this story from medieval as well as modern sources. A translation of an anonymous Irish version dating from the late Middle Ages is included in Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, *A Celtic Miscellany: Translations from the Celtic Literatures*, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth, 1971), p. 165. Katharine M. Briggs, *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales*, 4 vols (Bloomington, 1970–71), part B, II (1971), 488, prints a version deriving from Gervase of Tilbury (*c.* AD 1211) that has no happy ending, for the sailor is drowned before he can return to the upper world.

> The annals say: when the monks of Clonmacnoise
> Were all at prayers inside the oratory
> A ship appeared above them in the air.
>
> The anchor dragged along behind so deep
> It hooked itself into the altar rails
> And then, as the big hull rocked to a standstill,
>
> A crewman shinned and grappled down the rope
> And struggled to release it. But in vain.
> 'This man can't bear our life here and will drown',
>
> The abbot said, 'unless we help him'. So
> They did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back
> Out of the marvellous as he had known it.[45]

The poem is a deceptively translucent fantasy set in the time of the ascetic saints of medieval Ireland. During the centuries when Irish Christianity was still in its youthful vigour, the monastery of Clonmacnoise, located close by the River Shannon in a site very near to the geographical midpoint of Ireland, was one of the places from which zealous souls such as St Brendan set out across the North Atlantic on pilgrimage *pro amore Dei*, as they put it, so as to put their lives into the hands of God. Once they had set out from home, then either God, or fate, or chance, or the shifting winds and currents led them through a bewildering sequence of lands of wonder and enchantment, as was recounted in the tales known as the *immrama*, 'the voyages'.[46] Here in this poem by Heaney, however, no one departs on pilgrimage. Instead, a mysterious ship of the air, en route from an unknown port and bound for an unknown destination, suddenly appears in the sky above the monastery, interrupting the monks' daily opus Dei. A set of correspondences is thereby established. Our world is to that mysterious ship's more refined sky world, it would seem, much as the world that extends beneath our oceans is to the terra firma on which we dwell. It is for this reason that the man who climbs down from the ship so as to dislodge its anchor is in danger of drowning, for the same air that sustains our life is like water to his lungs. Once again, a simple change of perspective makes a world of difference. To an angelic visitor, it

[45] Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966–1996* (New York, 1998), p. 338.

[46] The Old Irish *immrama* are discussed by Myles Dillon in ch. 6 (pp. 124–31) of his survey *Early Irish Literature* (Chicago, 1948). The most famous of the stories of wandering saints is the ninth- or tenth-century Latin *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*. Versions of the legend of St Brendan, translated from a number of languages, are included in W. R. J. Barron and Glyn S. Burgess, *The Voyage of St. Brendan: Themes and Variations* (Exeter, 1981).

seems, our world even in its most spiritually enlightened configurations might seem as dark and exotic and dangerous as the bottom of the ocean might seem to a person who ventured there without a pressurized cabin or self-contained breathing apparatus. So the poem ends with the simple declaration 'The man climbed back / out of the marvellous as he had known it'.[47]

With that last line, Heaney transforms his narrative into a fable; that is, he endows it with spiritual truth. The truth that is hidden in this little lie is not hard to discover: namely, that it is our world that is a place of marvels. Every day of our lives, we see marvellous things, we hear marvellous sounds, we smell marvellous smells, we touch marvellous things. Even in a prison cell or monastic cell, deprived of almost all sources of sensory stimulation, the human imagination, through its powers of memory and invention, can create visionary landscapes out of insubstantial nothings. Through the cumulative process that we call tradition, every storyteller who has ever lived has added new pages to the book of marvels — the book of all myths — that any human being with a reasonably active imagination is now in a position to read and to augment.

The final story to which I will call attention is one that I learned from the outstanding Scottish storyteller Betsy Whyte. Although I heard her tell it on several occasions, it was in the summer of 1986, two years before her death, that I recorded it from her at her council flat in Montrose, a market town on the east coast of Scotland where she was then living with her husband Bryce. Both Betsy and Bryce Whyte were travelling people or 'tinkers', a class of social outcasts who, though not gypsies and not always mobile these days, resemble the Romani in their traditional semi-nomadic way of life and their rejection of many middle-class values. By the time I met Betsy Whyte she had become well known to the Scottish

[47] The basic situation of Heaney's fable is not unlike that imagined by Jules Verne in pt 1, ch. 15 of the famous novel mentioned above. When the fictitious first-person narrator of *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* is first introduced to the mysteries of the deep, he and two companions reach the bottom of the sea while encased in self-contained deep-water suits. He observes that the water that surrounds him is like the atmosphere of a different world: 'Truly this water which surrounded me was but another air denser than the terrestrial atmosphere, but almost as transparent. Above me was the calm surface of the sea' (Walter James Miller, *The Annotated Jules Verne: Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* (New York, 1976), p. 105). The artist who illustrated this passage in the first (1870) edition of Verne's book expressed this strange confusion of worlds in his own medium of a copper-plate engraving (reproduced as the frontispiece to Miller's edition). His three human striders of the ocean depths are depicted like three moon walkers of today. Giant jellyfish hover over them in a manner that calls to mind more recent representations of spaceships.

reading public through a best-selling memoir based on her childhood years, *The Yellow on the Broom*.[48] She was also an occasional featured guest at regional folk festivals where she took part in women's storytelling sessions.[49]

Whyte called this story 'The Man and the Boat'. It is a traditional tale that she had learned from her mother, and in one form or another it seems to have been in circulation for a good while in the British Isles. Indeed, in the next chapter I will show that no less a storyteller than the Venerable Bede played a variation upon it in book 4 of his *Ecclesiastical History*.[50] What is especially intriguing about this tale is the way that, like the medieval legend on which Heaney's poem is based, it tests the boundaries of conceptual categories. Sandy, the protagonist of the tale, takes a walk away from a crowd of merrymakers down to a lakeside, sick with himself for having no story to tell. Whisked off to a land he has never known before, for a number of years he inhabits the physical body of a woman. The full story goes as follows, as I have come to tell it myself on occasion.[51]

> One time a laird invited a lot of friends and neighbours to his house, and he announced a contest. He said he would give a prize of a golden guinea to whoever could tell the biggest lie. Now there were some fine liars in this neighbourhood, and all of them came

[48] In the eyes of many of its readers, Whyte's book *The Yellow on the Broom: The Early Years of a Traveller Woman* (Edinburgh, 1979) captures the essence of the older way of life of the Scottish travelling people.

[49] Two of Whyte's tales, 'One-Eye, Two-Eyes and Three-Eyes' and 'The Cat and the Hard Cheese', are included in *The Green Man of Knowledge and Other Scots Traditional Tales*, ed. by Alan Bruford (Aberdeen, 1982), pp. 1–7 and 41–53, respectively. Another, 'The Black Laird', is printed in *The Penguin Book of Scottish Folktales*, ed. by Neil Philip (London, 1995), pp. 52–54. A recording of Whyte telling 'One-Eye, Two-Eyes, Three Eyes' in her Perthshire dialect can be heard on the Greentrax CD *Scottish Traditional Tales*, Scottish Tradition, 17 (Edinburgh, 2000), track 1.

[50] See pp. 309–25 below. This story type is discussed by Georges Denis Zimmermann, *The Irish Storyteller* (Dublin, 2001), pp. 537–48. Zimmerman also writes at some length (pp. 550–89) on attitudes towards truth and lies among storytellers and their audiences in Ireland — a land whose people can generally be counted upon to honour the Golden Rule of storytelling, 'Never spoil a good story for the sake of the truth'.

[51] The text as given here is not a transcription of Whyte's words; rather, it is an abridged paraphrase that is adapted to my own style and pace. The field tape on which the present text is based is number 86BW01 in my collection. The originals of my field tapes from this period are housed in the Archive of Folk Culture at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Interested readers may consult *The Penguin Book of Scottish Folktales*, ed. by Philip, pp. 55–59, for the text of a different performance of this story told by Whyte in 1987, as recorded and transcribed by Linda Williamson.

to compete. But there was one young man named Sandy who was a cattleman on the laird's estate, and he couldn't think of a single lie. 'Ah cannae tell a lee', Sandy said. It just wasn't in his creed. So when all the other guests were talking and drinking and starting to tell lies, he went off walking by himself down by the shore of a nearby loch. And there, wouldn't you know it, he saw a boat drawn up on the shore, complete with oars but with no one in it. Naturally, being a curious lad, he stepped into the boat to see if there was any sign of an owner. But as soon as he got in, *whsst!* It took off. Off it went across the loch, the two oars moving all by themselves, 'blip, blip', with no one there to row them.

Well, you can imagine how amazed and frightened Sandy was, but there was nothing to be done. The boat was gone. But as Sandy sat back, he felt his face, and he felt soft cheeks instead of his usual stubble of a beard. And he looked down, and he was wearing a beautiful taffeta dress. Gone were his old trousers and his boots all mired in dung. And he patted himself from head to foot, and he was definitely not a man! Well, the boat went on, and the boat went on, and in time it came to the other side of the loch and beached there. Sandy got out. Not knowing what else to do, he — or let's call him she, now — she set off down the road, and before long she came to a farm where she was offered some shelter and a bite to eat.

Now the man who owned that farm was a handsome fellow, and — well, to make a long story short, he took a liking to Sandy. And for her part, Sandy saw nothing wrong with the farmer, for he was a decent hard-working man and he treated her well. Sometimes Sandy longed for her old home and her friends, but what was she to do? *Ye maun dree yer weird*, as the Scots say — you must accept your fate. So one thing led to another, and it was not long before the two of them were married. And within another couple of years she had given birth to two of the bonniest bairns that you ever saw. And so things went on for a while.

One day, when her children were half grown up and the farm was doing well, Sandy went walking down to the shore to mend some fishing gear. There she was, down at the shore, and what did she see but a boat with not a soul in it. 'Oh, luik, there's the wee boat Ah came in', she says to herself. She couldn't resist — what would *you* do? She had to find out what the story was with that boat. So she stepped inside it, and you can guess what happened next. *Whsst!* The boat took off. Off it went till it was right out in deep water. Sandy was petrified. 'Ma man an' ma bairns, ma man an' ma bairns!' she cried. 'Oh, tak me back tae ma man an' ma bairns!' But the boat went right on, 'blip blip' with the oars, and after a while she fell asleep, the tears streaming from her eyes.

In time the boat landed on the opposite shore. Sandy woke up. She looked down at herself. Her dress was gone. She was in her old trousers and boots again, dung and all. Her face, her body — yes, there was Sandy the cattleman! So she — no, now let's call her 'he' again — so he got out of the boat and walked ashore, and there on the hill he saw a big house. The house was all lit up and he could hear people laughing and talking. Sandy walked up to the house, still dazed. He came into the big hall, and there stood the very same laird as before, entertaining the very same guests.

'Well, Sandy', the laird said. 'What's a-dae wi you? Where have you been the night?'

'Oh, whisht, man', Sandy says. 'Dinnae speak tae me! You'll never believe what's happened tae me. Ma man an' ma bairns! Ah'v lost ma man an' ma bairns!' And Sandy told the whole story of the boat and the oars and how he lost his husband and his two

> bonnie bairns, just as you've heard me tell it here, only he was greetin' all the while, the tears streaming down his face.
>
> When he finished, the laird spoke. 'Well, Sandy', he said with a smile. 'It's a fine tale you've told us tonight. There's no doubt, this is the biggest lee we've heard! Here', he said, holding out his hand. 'You take the golden guinea.'

At the core of this delightful tale is the familiar paradox of the person who has no story to tell but who then, remarkably, is given the gift of the finest story of all. In this instance, as in Heaney's poem set in Clonmacnoise (as well as in the early medieval legend on which that poem is based), a remarkable story is generated out of the unforeseen collision of two worlds that normally exist on separate planes of existence: 'our' world and 'theirs', we might simply call them, for the identity of the inhabitants of that parallel 'other' world remains mysterious. Coupled with that paradox and with that intersection of different worlds is a challenge to our usual concept of time as something that progresses uniformly, like a river flowing at the same steady pace. Here, as in other famous lies like the medieval European legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus (which was retold by Ælfric as a true story)[52] or like Washington Irving's well-loved yarn of Rip Van Winkle, one person might think that only a few minutes have passed, but to someone else, many years have ensued. In Betsy Whyte's twist on that familiar motif, it is the protagonist of the story who experiences the passage of time in years, as measured out in a sequence of pregnancies, births, and so on. For everyone else in that person's homeland, no more than an hour or two has passed. This particular lie, although hyperbolic, may conceal a truth that is only too familiar to anyone who has ever sat through a tedious lecture. What sometimes matters most about a period of time is not the mathematical sum of minutes and seconds of which it consists, but rather the psychological impact it has upon those who experience it.

An even more violent testing of conceptual categories is introduced when Sandy, the man who is the protagonist of the story, first turns into a young woman and then later, like the ancient Greek seer Tiresias, turns back into his former

[52] As an author who always kept an eye out for a good story as long as it could be regarded as truthful, Ælfric wrote two different summaries of the passion of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus: see Hugh Magennis, '*Ælfric and the Legend of the Seven Sleepers*', in *Holy Men and Holy Women: English Prose Saints' Lives and their Contexts*, ed. by Paul E. Szarmach (Albany, 1996), pp. 317–31. Magennis discusses these tales as characteristic examples of Ælfric's narrative art and devotional purposes. The passage on this theme that is included as an addition to the First Series of *Catholic Homilies* begins with a ringing declaration of the truthfulness of the story: 'Us secgað bec, swa swa hit full soð is' (Books tell us, as is the complete truth); ibid., p. 322.

self.[53] The division of the human race into two genders, male and female, would seem to be among the most stable categories of all. After all, according to the foundational myth of the people of the Book, did God not make things so from the time of Adam and Eve? And yet it is obvious that in our own era in particular, the category of gender is under siege. For the first time, it seems, people are asking 'Why is gender fixed?' and 'Does it always have to be that way?'. The term 'transgender studies' has become a routine element of the academic vocabulary. A factor that had once seemed to be a bedrock aspect of human identity now seems just as subject to adjustment as anything else. Moreover, regardless of current controversies regarding sexual identity, there have always been members of both sexes who have departed from the pattern of behaviour that was expected on the basis of their gender.

To return to my starting point in this chapter, Betsy Whyte's story of 'The Man and the Boat' strongly tests the categories of truth and falsehood. Paradoxically, it is the person who tells the simple truth 'as he had known it', in Heaney's phrase, who wins the prize for the biggest lie. Perhaps an allegory lurks beneath the surface here, as well. Whyte's story may encode a lesson for any scholar or critic who is thought to be a great truth-teller, or who fancies himself as such, when in reality he or she is no more than a stronger storyteller than others.

With those two narratives, one of them a short poem by a Nobel Prize–winning author and the other one a fireside tale told by one of Scotland's often-despised travelling people, I will conclude this meditation concerning true stories and other lies. Even though my remarks may have seemed at times as circuitous as the wanderings of an Anglo-Saxonist lost in a jungle, hoping very much to find his way home, I trust they will be read as part of an ongoing effort among medievalists as well as scholars from other disciplines to account for the ways that stories of all kinds can function as symbolic narratives. In previous chapters we have found this to be true of the 'beautiful lies' that are incorporated into heroic poems like *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*. We have also found it to be true of *Widsith*, *Deor*, and other poems of the Exeter Book, many of which are set in the voice of fictive narrators who purport to tell their own stories. Insofar as I have had occasion to refer to the pages of Bede, Asser, Æthelweard, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, William of Malmesbury, and comparable prose sources, even more 'beautiful lies' have been in evidence, sometimes succeeding one another so thickly that one forgets how fanciful they are. Symbolic narratives of the kinds that have been

[53] Ovid tells the beguiling story of Tiresias's metamorphoses into and out of the body of a woman in bk 3, lines 316–38 of his *Metamorphoses*.

discussed in the preceding pages have long provided the foundation and framework for people's understanding of the world, whether socially, artistically, scientifically, or spiritually. To scholars of a future generation, they can offer precious insights into patterns of thought that were once taken for granted, even if they have long since been superceded by something more in tune with the current temperament.

As has often been said, a good story is an old story, however new its accoutrements may be. And yet the serious study of storytelling as the defining characteristic of humankind may still be in its infancy. We may still just be getting acquainted with ourselves as the sole species on earth who, through the power of counterfactual language, can speak into existence worlds of the imagination that offer us moral guidance and intellectual sustenance and that even, at times, may be discovered to be habitable.

Chapter 8

Bede's Cædmon, 'The Man Who Had No Story' (Irish Tale-Type 2412B)

The story of Cædmon's poetic inspiration, as told by the Venerable Bede in book 4, chapter 24 of his *Ecclesiastical History*,[1] is of exceptional interest for the light it has been thought to shed on Anglo-Saxon literary history, or on the early mythography of that topic. Whatever Bede's motives were in telling the story of Cædmon and his *Hymn*, his account can be read as an origin myth for two related activities: first, the use of native English verse to celebrate Christian themes, and second, the use of the technology of writing to record native poetry.[2] In the current critical climate there is no need to belabour the point that Bede's miracle tale should be read as an example of legendary history — that is, history as shaped by an interested person into memorable forms.[3]

I wish to express my gratitude to Colin Ireland for having offered some generous comments, as well as a few helpful correctives, on an earlier draft of this chapter. In addition, I am grateful to Daniel Paul O'Donnell for having sent me a pre-publication copy of his new book on Cædmon in time for me to draw on it here, and to Patricia Lysaght for some advice regarding the Irish language.

[1] Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 414–21.

[2] See chapter 1 above at pp. 28–29. As for Bede's motives, one of them is clear: he shapes his chapter so as to call attention to God's power to work miracles on earth. In addition, his manner of telling the full story of Cædmon's career and death ensures that any interest accruing to this person as a vernacular poet is firmly subsumed into the world of Latin monastic learning, the world that Bede himself both inhabited and esteemed.

[3] By calling attention to the mythopoeic aspects of Bede's history, I do not wish to deny that there was a historical Cædmon, a monk who, in preceding years, had gained some fame for his vernacular verse. There very likely was such a man, for Bede would scarcely have wanted to face

The Tale and its Analogues

Analogues to the story of Cædmon have been cited with such frequency in the scholarly literature as to confirm that whatever else it may be, this tale is a natural magnet for specialists in comparative religion, folklore, and mythology. Precedents for Bede's account of a lowly person's divine inspiration have been cited going as far back as Hesiod's account of his encounter with the Muses one day on the slopes of Mount Helicon, Aeschylus's supposed inspiration to write tragedy as the result of a dream vision, and the prophet Mohammed's life-transforming call to preach the Word of God.[4] Moreover, Bede's account was influential in its own time, for (as has long been recognized) the preface to the Old Saxon poem the *Heliand* includes an account of similar inspiration that is based on this chapter of the *Ecclesiastical History*.[5] Even 'dream vision' poems from North American Indian tradition that result from actual initiatory practices have been brought into relation to Cædmon's *Hymn* and the life-altering experience from which it is said to have sprung.[6] Still, the author of the most recent systematic attempt to pinpoint useful analogies, Daniel Paul O'Donnell, has arrived at conclusions that are largely negative: 'Despite a hunt spanning two centuries, no unambiguous source or close and detailed analogue to either Bede's account of Cædmon's inspiration or the *Hymn* itself has been found.'[7]

possible criticism for having invented him. What is at stake, both here and elsewhere in the *Ecclesiastical History*, is Bede's ability to shape the materials of life into memorable forms, while subordinating every incident to the devotional purposes that animate his work as a whole.

[4] An overview of analogues to the Cædmon story proposed in the scholarly literature up to the early 1970s is provided by G. A. Lester, 'The Cædmon Story and its Analogues', *Neoph*, 58 (1974), 225–37. Lester's atomistic analysis of these parallels, however, is not conducive to understanding which elements pertain to the narrative core and which are incidental.

[5] As is noted by Dobbie, p. c n. 3, and discussed by Theodore M. Andersson, 'The Caedmon Fiction in the *Heliand* Preface', *PMLA*, 89 (1974), 278–84.

[6] Louise Pound, 'Cædmon's Dream Song', in *Studies in English Philology: A Miscellany in Honor of Frederick Klaeber* (Minneapolis, 1929), pp. 232–39. Working in a comparable vein, Marijane Osborn, 'Translation, Translocation, and the Native Context of "Cædmon's Hymn"', *New Comparison*, 8 (1989), 13–23, discusses inter alia several Old Norse and Celtic parallels to the theme of poetic inspiration through dream visions (at pp. 16–17), while Albert Bates Lord, 'Cædmon Revisited', in *Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period*, ed. by Helen Damico and John Leyerle (Kalamazoo, 1993), pp. 121–37, discusses singers from Turkey and the Fiji Islands whose inspiration is said to have come via a dream.

[7] Daniel Paul O'Donnell, *Cædmon's Hymn: A Multimedia Study, Archive, and Edition* (Cambridge, 2005), § 2.46. O'Donnell devotes his ch. 2 ('Sources and Analogues') to an exemplary

Without discounting any other possible parallels, some of which may be found more relevant or persuasive than others, I wish to propose that the narrative core of Bede's account of Cædmon is modeled on a type of tale much closer to hand, from a northern British perspective, than the stories just mentioned.[8] The tale-type to which I refer is commonly known as 'The Man Who Had No Story'. In the Irish language, common names for it are *An fear gan scéal* 'The Man Without a Story' and *An fear nach rabh scéal ar bith aige* 'The Man Who Had No Story at All'. This type of tale is both distinct and popular enough to have been assigned its own number, 2412B, in the standard index *The Types of the Irish Folktale*.[9] Since no tale of this type is identified in Uther's index *The Types of International Folktales*,[10] 'The Man Who Had No Story' seems to be specific to Ireland and Scotland, two contiguous regions where it has often been collected during the past two centuries.[11] It is discussed at some length, with sustained attention to six examples recorded in Irish or English during the period from the 1820s to the 1930s, in the concluding chapter of Georges D. Zimmerman's magisterial study

evaluation of the story's many proposed analogues, of which he counts approximately forty-five to the story and a few more to Cædmon's *Hymn*. Like Lester's, his approach to these proposed parallels is somewhat atomistic, as befits the ad hoc and impressionistic manner in which the authors of these studies have tended to advance them. My own preferred method of inquiry is to ask whether there is any well-known tale-type, or abstract narrative pattern, to which the story of Cædmon can meaningfully be related, for any individual tale that might be cited as a parallel will have idiosyncracies that undercut the comparison as soon as it is made.

[8] L. W. Chappell, 'The Cædmon Story', *Englische Studien*, 69 (1934), 152–54, cites a Scots Gaelic analogue culled from J. F. Campbell's *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, 2 vols (Paisley, 1890–93), but it is only the initial scene of the tale he discusses (II, 33–35) that finds a parallel in either Bede's story or the tale-type discussed below. Likewise C. J. Vincent, 'A Cædmon Parallel', *Modern Language Notes*, 61 (1946), 61, cites a rather remote Irish parallel. Colin Ireland, 'An Irish Precursor of Cædmon', *Notes and Queries*, n.s., 44 (1997), 2–4, calls attention to an Irish poet, Colmán mac Lénéni (who died *c*. 606), who refers to his own 'inspired sleep' as the source of a poem.

[9] Seán Ó Súilleabháin and Reidar Th. Christiansen, *The Types of the Irish Folktale*, FF Communications, 188 (Helsinki, 1963), pp. 343–44.

[10] Hans-Jörg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography*, parts I–III, FF Communications, 284–86 (Helsinki, 2004), replacing Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale*, FF Communications, 184 (Helsinki, 1961); both indexes cover the whole spectrum of folktale types from Ireland to India.

[11] Sean O'Sullivan (Seán Ó Súilleabháin), ed. and trans., *Folktales of Ireland* (London, 1966), p. 274, notes that 'one hundred and thirty-seven versions of it have been recorded in Ireland'. This number might be substantially augmented if a systematic effort to record the tale were made.

The Irish Storyteller.[12] The tale is such a familiar one among the storytellers of Ireland that Bo Almqvist, for many years the Head of the Department of Irish Folklore including the National Folklore Collection, reported that 'More than once, when I have asked for stories in Ireland, I have received the answer: "I don't know any, unless it would be The Man Who Had No Story."'[13]

Irish tale-type 2412B is thus a popular tale, known in numerous variants, that pertains fairly specifically to what might be called Bede's 'cultural zone'. One scarcely needs to be reminded that though Bede himself was of English background, the Northumbria of his era had been profoundly affected by a missionary effort emanating from Iona that had brought many native speakers of Irish to northern Britain. The chief result of this effort was the establishment of Celtic-style monasteries at Lindisfarne, Melrose, and other suitable spots. The influence of Irish culture on this region, however, had many causes, went beyond those specific places, and was not restricted to the religious sphere.[14] Given what is known about the conservative nature of oral tradition and the potential durability of folktale types, it is not implausible that an abstract narrative type that, thanks to the efforts of modern collectors, is well attested in Ireland and Scotland during the past two centuries should also have been in existence, though in different forms, in that same region at a much earlier date. The structure of Bede's tale so closely mirrors the structure of 'The Man Who Had No Story' that a professional folklorist setting out to make a historical-geographical study of that folktale type would naturally single out the first part of bk 4, ch. 24 of Bede's *History* as its earliest recorded instance.

[12] Georges D. Zimmerman, *The Irish Storyteller* (Dublin, 2001), pp. 537–48.

[13] Bo Almqvist, 'Notes' to Séamus Ó Catháin, 'An Fear Nach Rabh Scéal Ar Bith Aige', *Béaloideas*, 37–38 (1969–70), 51–64 (p. 64).

[14] The prolonged, intimate cultural contacts between three different ethnic groups in Bede's Northumbria (the Saxons, the Irish, and the Britons) is discussed by Colin Ireland in his unpublished PhD dissertation 'The Celtic Background to the Story of Caedmon and his Hymn' (University of California, Los Angeles, 1986). Similarly, Mark Atherton, 'Saxon or Celt? Cædmon, "The Seafarer" and the Irish Tradition', in *Celts and Christians: New Approaches to the Religious Traditions of Britain and Ireland*, ed. by Atherton (Cardiff, 2002), pp. 79–99, emphasizes that Bede's Northumbria had 'many international connections' and was 'an ideal situation for religious, cultural and literary contacts', particularly at the monastery of Whitby under Abbess Hild, who had been influenced by both the Roman mission from Canterbury and the Irish mission from Iona (p. 82). Elizabeth O'Brien, 'Contacts between Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England in the Seventh Century', *ASSAH*, 6 (1993), 93–102, presents archaeological evidence showing that traffic between Ireland and England went both ways, for some burial types associated with Anglo-Saxon England can also be traced in Ireland at this time.

Since these claims need specific justification, the parallel I propose should be examined more closely. The capsule summary of Irish tale-type 2412B that is provided in Ó Súilleabháin and Christiansen's reference book is a natural starting point:

> A man gets lodgings at a house one night. After a meal, he is asked to tell a story or to sing a song. When he replies that he can do neither, he is asked to go outside on some errand, and for several hours he has fantastic experiences. When he returns to the house, exhausted, next morning and tells the people there about what he has suffered, they tell him that he will always have that, as a story, to tell in future.

That is the story in a nutshell. As with any tale-type, individual storytellers are free to flesh out its bare bones by adding ornamental and descriptive passages, by developing character through the use of dialogue, by alluding to features of the local landscape or culture, by doubling or trebling one or another type of incident, by adding sequel episodes or narrative complications, and so forth. To some extent, even details that may seem to pertain to the core elements of a tale-type are subject to the process of variation as well. A given variant may feature a female protagonist rather than a male one, for example; or it may be drawn out of the genre of the *Zaubermärchen* (or 'magic tale', the classic fairy tale genre) into the genre of the saint's legend; or it may be recounted as if it had been a historical event, and so forth. Variation of this kind is the soul of an oral tradition. The ability to individualize a tale so that it is felt to be 'in the tradition' while also being admired as a brilliant individual creation is largely what distinguishes a masterful storyteller from a mediocre one.

When one examines Bede's tale of Cædmon with Irish tale-type 2412B in mind, the resemblance of its plot to that structural pattern is quite evident. Equally obvious is that Bede's tale departs from that pattern in regard to some important details. These points of divergence will be worth attention in due time, but first the tale as Bede tells it should be summarized. Since an exact and neutral précis of this account is required, rather than trying to provide one myself I will draw on O'Donnell's summary of Bede's chapter, leaving aside O'Donnell's explanatory notes and renumbering his paragraphs so as to facilitate the present analysis.[15] His entire summary will be cited (with one incidental omission in section 4) even though, as is important to keep in mind, the parallel I am adducing pertains only to the first two of his four paragraphs. Likewise, the text of Cædmon's *Hymn* is included here, as in O'Donnell's summary, even though it is only peripherally relevant to my claims.

[15] O'Donnell, *Cædmon's Hymn: A Multimedia Study*, §§ 1.2–1.5.

1. According to Bede, Cædmon was an old lay herdsman in the religious community of *Streanæshalch* (Whitby Abbey). Although the singing of vernacular songs was a customary entertainment at the abbey, Cædmon himself never learned to sing, and, as a result, used to leave feasts before he could be called upon to do so. Having left such a gathering one night and returned to his stables, Cædmon fell asleep, whereupon he was addressed in his dream by 'someone' (Bede uses the Latin indefinite pronoun *quidam*), who asks him to sing for him. Explaining that he cannot, and, indeed, that he has just left the feast for that reason, Cædmon at first refuses. When the visitor insists, however, he gives in. Asking for a subject, he is told, *Canta* [. . .] *principium creaturarum*, 'Sing [. . .] about the beginning of created things'. Almost immediately he begins his famous *Hymn*, which Bede paraphrases in Latin for the benefit of his readers:

> Nunc laudare debemus auctorem regni caelestis, potentiam Creatoris et consilium illius, facta Patris gloriae: quomodo ille, cum sit aeternus Deus, omnium miraculorum auctor extitit, qui primo filiis hominum caelum pro culmine tecti, dehinc terram Custos humani generis omnipotens creauit.
>
> (Now we must praise the Maker of the heavenly kingdom, the power of the Creator and his counsel, the deeds of the Father of glory and how He, since he is the eternal God, was the Author of all marvels and first created the heavens as a roof for the children of men and then, the almighty Guardian of the human race, created the earth.)

2. When Cædmon awakes, he remembers everything that happened to him. He adds additional verses to his song and reports his vision and his new skill to his steward. Brought to the abbess, Cædmon describes his dream and sings his *Hymn*. He is then assigned a sacred text to translate into verse overnight by way of a test. When he proves himself able to do so, he is ordered to join the religious community.

3. In the course of his training, it is discovered that Cædmon's gift extends to all holy subjects: upon hearing a passage of Church history or doctrine, Bede tells us, Cædmon is able after a brief period to turn his lessons into *carmen dulcissimum*, 'most melodious verse'. In addition to the *Hymn*, his works are said to include poems on a wide range of subjects: the creation of the world, the beginnings of mankind, the biblical Genesis, the flight from Egypt and entry into the promised land, the incarnation, passion, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord, the coming of the Holy Spirit, the teachings of the apostles, the terrors of hell, joys of heaven, and an account of God's gifts to mankind.

4. The last part of Bede's account concerns Cædmon's exemplary life in the abbey. [. . .] Bede reports that Cædmon was humble and obedient to the monastic rule and extremely zealous in his work against those who were not. After an illness of fourteen days, he is said to die like a saint: able to predict the hour of his own death, Cædmon asks to be moved to the hospice in which the terminally ill are lodged even though his own condition seems anything but serious. He gathers his friends and servants around him and asks if they have any outstanding quarrels with him. Told that they do not, he prays briefly, asks for the Blessed Sacrament, and finally expires just before nocturn.

Readers following my present argument may disregard paragraphs 3 and 4 of this summary, which tell of Cædmon's later career and death. This part of Bede's

history is steeped in the *topoi* of hagiography, as others have pointed out.[16] Paragraphs 1 and 2, however, mirror the structure of Irish tale-type 2412B. In the Irish tale, a man *withdraws from company* because he cannot sing or tell a tale; he has a *remarkable experience* of some kind; he *returns to that same company to perform a song or story* based on his strange experience; and *he is recognized* as a person who will always be known by that song or story (my italics). In Bede's account, Cædmon *withdraws from company* because of embarrassment about his lack of poetic talent; that night he has *a remarkable dream-vision* and spontaneously produces a fully formed song; the next day he *performs his song* before the company of monks, to their amazement and delight; and thereafter *he is recognized* as the author of his *Hymn*, a work that preserves his fame even today.

A Numinous Figure Calls a Lowly Person by Name

The parallels between Bede's account of Cædmon and 'The Man Who Had No Story' concern more than the basic elements of the plot, however. There is another feature of Bede's account that clinches its affinities with this tale-type. I am not referring to the cowherd's name, though the fact that 'Cædmon' is a British rather than Anglo-Saxon name is of interest as it points to Celtic influence.[17] Rather, what is significant is the manner in which Bede weaves the personal name of a very ordinary person into his story.[18] The mysterious person who appears to Cædmon in a dream addresses him specifically by name: *'Caedmon', inquit, 'canta mihi aliquid'* ('Cædmon', he said, 'sing me something'). Since the cowherd has never encountered this person before, a sense of the stranger's numinous character is thereby conveyed. His commands therefore take on greater authority than they might otherwise have. Similarly, in modern variants of tale-type 2412B the

[16] Geoffrey Shepherd, 'The Prophetic Cædmon', *Review of English Studies*, 5 (1954), 113–22; Gernot Wieland, 'Cædmon, the Clean Animal', *American Benedictine Review*, 35 (1984), 194–203; E. G. Stanley, 'St. Cædmon', *Notes and Queries*, n.s., 45 (1998), 4–5.

[17] For discussion, see Paul Cavill, 'Bede and *Cædmon's Hymn*', in *'Lastworda Betst': Essays in Memory of Christine E. Fell*, ed. by Carole Hough and Kathryn A. Lowe (Donington, 2002), pp. 1–17 (at pp. 4–5). Cavill's inference that Bede knew Cædmon's name from a written source (now lost) is intriguing, though speculative. If Bede did have a written source for the name, one need not conclude that he necessarily had a written source for the whole story.

[18] The folkloric motif present here — 'Person Accidentally Met Unexpectedly Knows the Other's Name', motif N762 in Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, 2nd edn, 6 vols (Bloomington, 1955–58) — is a characteristic component of tale type 2412B.

protagonist is invariably an ordinary person, often (like Cædmon) a servant or farm-labourer and sometimes even specifically a cattleman;[19] and very often he is called by name by one or another weird stranger (or strangers) whom he encounters soon after he departs from the house that is the initial setting.[20] The otherworldly nature of that encounter is thereby strongly hinted at, without any clear information being given as to exactly who the stranger is and whether he or she is benevolent or threatening in nature (or some combination of the two).

An example of this tendency for the protagonist of tale-type 2412B to be singled out by name is found in a version of the tale that was taken down in November, 1965, from the recital of Michael James Timoney of county Donegal. Annotating this narrative on the occasion of its publication in *Béaloideas*, the journal of the Folklore of Ireland Society, Almqvist describes it as the most 'perfectly balanced' and 'sophisticated' of the versions of this tale that he had encountered up to that date.[21] Timoney's version, which features a wandering basketmaker as protagonist, begins as follows:

> *Well*, bhí fear thíos annseo i mBarr a' Ghaoith i bhfad ó shin, agus b'é an t-ainm a bhí air Brianaí Ó Braonacháin.
>
> (Well, there was a man down here in Barr an Ghaoith a long time ago and his name was Brian Ó Braonacháin.)

The name of the protagonist is thus introduced at the start. Before long, Brian finds himself cut off from other company by a terrible fog, and — here I must shorten the tale, which includes many bizarre details — eventually he blunders

[19] As in Betsy Whyte's story 'The Man and the Boat', as retold in the previous chapter (pp. 303–05) and as published, in a different version, in *The Penguin Book of Scottish Folktales*, ed. by Neil Philip (London, 1995), pp. 55–59. In other published versions of tale-type 2412B, the man is variously said to be a horse trainer, a ploughman, or an itinerant harvester, if any trade for him is specified. In short, the protagonist is normally of humble occupation and rural roots.

[20] For two examples, see Zimmerman, *Irish Storyteller*, pp. 542–43. The first of these tales, dating from 1828, features 'Joan Coleman of Kinsale', a woman of poor means who is addressed by name by 'a very old man, with a long beard, roasting another man as old as himself on a spit before a great fire'. The second tale, dating from the same era, features 'Ned Sheehy', a serving man who is addressed by name in similar circumstances. For another instance, *Folktales of Ireland*, ed. and trans. by O'Sullivan, pp. 182–84, includes a tale recorded in 1933 featuring 'Rory O'Donoghue', a peddler who is repeatedly addressed by name in one or another magical setting.

[21] Almqvist, 'Notes' to Séamus Ó Catháin, 'An Fear Nach Rabh', p. 60. Timoney's story is given at pp. 51–55 (in Irish) and 55–59 (in English). In quoting the English version I draw on this translation, which is reprinted in *Irish Folktales*, ed. by Henry Glassie (New York, 1985), pp. 319–23.

into a long house with 'two lights in it and a fine light out of the door'. This turns out to be a wake-house filled with two rows of men. Here he is greeted by a black-haired girl seated in the centre of the room. When one of the men declares his intention to go out in search of a fiddler, for 'it is a very lonely wake we are having here to-night', the girl replies:

> 'O', a deir an cailín catach dubh, 'níl feidhm daoibh a bheith a ghabháil fá choinne fidiléar' ar bith anocht', a deir si, 'tá an fidiléir is fearr in Éirinn in bhur measc annseo anocht', a deir sí, 'Brianaí Ó Braonacháin as Barr a' Ghaoith'.
>
> ('Oh', said the girl with the curly black hair, 'you don't need to go for any fiddler to-night', said she, 'you have the best fiddler in Ireland among you here to-night', said she, 'Brian Ó Braonacháin from Barr an Ghaoith.')

Although Brian protests that 'that is something I never did in my life, play a turn on a fiddle', before he knows it the bow and the fiddle are in his hands, 'and they all said that they had never heard any fiddler playing a tune on a fiddle better than Brian Ó Braonacháin from Barr an Ghaoith'. Towards the end of the tale, once he returns from this remarkable wake-house (where other equally strange adventures await him), he is told he will always be *an fear a bhfuil an scéal* [*aige*] *le hinnse* 'the man who has the story to tell'. The detail of the naming of the lowly protagonist by someone whom he encounters in an otherworldly setting confirms the structural resemblance between Bede's tale and modern versions of Irish tale-type 2412B.

Märchen *or Popular Legend?*

Still, the objection might be raised that Bede's story of Cædmon is scarcely a *Märchen* 'wonder tale', and so any comparisons of this chapter of the *Ecclesiastical History* with the folktale genre ought to be ruled out. The story of Cædmon is not set somewhere long ago and far away, as are the classic fairy tales of Europe. It is localized at a particular monastery in Bede's own kingdom of Northumbria, and its action takes place in the not-very-distant past. Certain of its details, such as its real-world geographical setting and its naming of the Abbess Hild as a respected witness, are clearly meant to leave the impression that nothing in this chapter is to be taken as untrue. Bede's narrative thus gravitates out of the genre of the folktale in the direction of local history and the saint's legend, two types of narrative that often converge. Parallels with any folktale type must therefore (according to this view) be rejected as generically impertinent.

While that objection might at first seem to carry weight, in fact it only confirms the connection I am making. Specialists who have written on Irish tale-type

2412B have emphasized that the action of this tale often takes place in a real-world setting. The author of a survey of twentieth-century Irish versions of this story, as Zimmerman remarks, therefore 'prefers to call the piece a "folk legend" rather than a "folktale" because of the precise (though varying) localization of the framing part, the naming of the central character (who has as many identities as there are versions), and other "realistic" details'.[22] Similarly, Almqvist has remarked that 'In its strong local colouring and in its closeness to genuine folk-belief, too, The Man Who Had No Story is more reminiscent of a popular legend than of a folktale'.[23] The setting of Bede's tale at the monastery of Whitby, together with that author's evident belief in the story as an actual occurrence, is therefore completely consistent with the account that professional folklorists have given of tale-type 2412B.

Bede's Originality

As is to be expected (and as I have been quick to acknowledge), Bede's account of Cædmon departs from the usual contours of tale-type 2412B in regard to a number of details. Cædmon does not find lodgings at the monastery for the night, for example; he is already living there as one of its lay members. He is not sent away from the feast so as to go on some errand, but rather he leaves the feast of his own choice. That night he has no more than a single remarkable experience, not a string of them, and, correspondingly, nothing is said about his being exhausted upon his return the next day. In addition, Cædmon wins esteem as a singer, not as a storyteller, departing from the usual situation with tale-type 2412B. These differences, it will perhaps be conceded, fall into the category of details of the sort that any narrator might vary in the course of individualizing a tale.

In two regards, however, Bede's tale of Cædmon differs importantly from modern variants of tale-type 2412B. The first of these differences regards its religious tenor. Cædmon is not just any poor fellow suffering from a bad case of nerves; he

[22] Zimmerman, *Irish Storyteller*, p. 544, paraphrasing Criostóir Mac Cárthaigh, 'The Man Who Had No Story', *Sinsear*, 2 (1980), 115–22. What Mac Cárthaigh precisely has to say is that 'Although classified as a Folktale, and though bearing a good deal of resemblance to the accepted form of the Western European folktale in its humour and its sometimes multi-episodic structure, the story does however have more in common with the Folk Legend in both its closeness to reality and in its use of topical social themes' (pp. 116–17).

[23] Almqvist, 'Notes' to Séamus Ó Catháin, 'An Fear Nach Rabh', p. 62.

is a lay member of a monastic community, one who soon takes on monastic vows. Similarly, the stranger who accosts him in his dream is manifestly to be taken as an emissary from God, and what Cædmon sings in response to that person's commands is a hymn with liturgical overtones. All the songs that Cædmon later goes on to compose (as Bede tells the story) are devoted to religious themes, and their language is exceptionally beautiful because they are divinely inspired. Here we see to what end Bede is directing his talents as a writer of providential history, for tale-type 2412B is normally anything but a religious tale. What Bede seems to have done is to adopt the core idea of a tale that, today, is told chiefly for the sake of entertainment so as to turn it into a narrative glorifying the power of God. Of course, all that Bede ever wrote has a religious tenor, and so the development of his chapter in such a direction should come as no surprise.

In addition, Bede's story of Cædmon departs importantly from versions of tale-type 2412B in its development of a long aftermath to the initial frame-tale. Normally, modern versions of the tale end as soon as the protagonist has recounted his adventures and has won a kind of local fame. Bede's chapter, however, includes two sequel episodes. Bede first tells that the monks of Whitby proceeded to read Cædmon a passage of sacred history or doctrine, 'bidding him to make a song out of it, if he could, in metrical form'. Cædmon's successful response to this challenge leads to his being invited to become a monk. Thereafter, Bede says, Cædmon composed any number of songs on devotional themes. An account of that man's 'beautiful ending' rounds off the chapter on a suitably pious note. By introducing supplementary details along these lines, Bede ensures that his narrative will have exemplary value. God's grace reaches even as far as an obscure byre in Northumbria, and an ignorant cattle-man becomes a mouthpiece for the divine Word.

No variant of tale-type 2412B with which I am familiar includes sequel episodes resembling these. On the contrary, those variants often dwell at some length (and with droll humour) on the protagonist's series of fantastic adventures. Bede tells of only a single dream-vision. In comparison with modern versions of this story-type, Bede's chapter thus strikes one as top-light in its initial development, then bottom-heavy in its emphasis on the role of the monks in receiving Cædmon into their midst and nursing his talents along. As a result of this shift of narrative weight, Bede's tale celebrates the virtues of a life lived in accord with monastic discipline, including the habit of rumination over scriptural texts. Bede's story of Cædmon can thus be read as a showpiece demonstrating that the Latin textual culture of medieval Christianity was such a powerful institutional entity as to be able to absorb the native English tradition of oral poetry as the source of yet more devotional texts. O'Donnell makes this same point in his own way:

> Given modern interest in the mechanics of Cædmon's inspiration, perhaps the most surprising thing about Bede's chapter is the extent to which it is not about the 'miracle' that made Cædmon a poet. The real story in IV.24 is not how Cædmon learned to sing as much as it is how well he learned to do so and how this ability affected his life and the lives of those lucky enough to hear him.[24]

My own thesis helps to clarify this state of affairs, for it is easy to see that what Bede has done in this chapter is to take a remarkable story that could have stood alone (paragraphs 1 and 2, as summarized above) and to 'gloss' that account with both an introduction and a long sequel (paragraphs 3 and 4) that further develop that story and bring out its significance for the benefit of members of his chief audience, who were members of the clergy.

Oral Tradition Present and Past

'The Man Who Had No Story' provides such delightful opportunities for storytellers to display their improvisational skills that I am sorely tempted to cite additional versions of it so as to flesh out the claims made in the preceding paragraphs. Such an exercise is unnecessary, however. It would reveal far more about modern Scottish and Irish storytelling than about Bede and his narrative art. In the preceding chapter I have had occasion to cite one complete example of tale-type 2412B, Betsy Whyte's story 'The Man and the Boat', a droll tale that hinges upon the protagonist's sex change from male to female and back again. Also available in print is a version of 'The Man and the Boat' as told by another Scottish traveller, Willie McPhee. With tongue-in-cheek flair, McPhee recounts his version in the first person singular voice, as if the experience of being transformed into a nubile young girl had been his own, sometime back in his younger days. Having spent a pleasant evening with 'Big Willie' during the summer of 1988 in a cottage in Fife, Scotland (not all that great a distance from Bede's Jarrow or Cædmon's Whitby), I can well imagine his friends doubling up in laughter to hear him relate this tale. Willie was not only a strong, grizzled old man at the time I met him. He also had earned a reputation as an outstanding storyteller and as one of the finest pipers among the Scottish travelling people, among whom he often had received the high honour of piping at the graveside during funerals. The notion that 'Big Willie' McPhee would have to slink away from a ceilidh-house with the Cædmon-esque excuse that 'I canny [can't] tell stories, I canny sing sangs. I canny

[24] O'Donnell, *Cædmon's Hymn: A Multimedia Study*, § 1.10.

play pipes. I can dae naething like that. I'm useless!' would have struck his listeners as deliciously absurd.[25]

With this last reference to the value still set on music, song, and storytelling among the travelling people of Scotland, we have come a long way away from Northumbria in the era of the *breoma bocera Beda* 'the famous scholar Bede', as the author of the late Old English poem known as *Durham* refers to that respected authority.[26] All the same, as we shift our attention back and forth between the exquisitely learned Bede and the storytellers of the present day, some things change and others do not. Not many present-day Irish and Scottish storytellers live and breathe Latin, as Bede did. Only some may share his deeply devout outlook on human experience. What the skilled storytellers of today do have in common with Bede is the ability to spin the threads of life into the multi-coloured garment of a well-told tale. As John McNamara has written, calling attention to Bede as an author who absorbed a great deal of knowledge from oral tradition and who wrote in a milieu that had only recently ceased being wholly preliterate,

> For all his learning, Bede lived in a predominately oral community, one that constituted itself as a community largely by its circulation of oral narratives. [. . .] I therefore employ the principles and methods of folklore research to the *Historia Ecclesistica* in order to render 'audible' some of the ways Bede treats oral narratives, focusing especially on legends circulating in monastic and popular tradition. [. . .] In the age of Bede, the culture of the monastery was never very far from the mentality of the popular culture taken as a whole.[27]

Citing numerous examples to support his case, McNamara argues that as a member of a textual community that was not isolated from the practice of oral storytelling, Bede served as a conduit for any number of legends current in his day.

We begin to learn something about the folkloric dimension of Bede's learned history from his very first chapter, where stories relating to Ireland have a prominent place, as they often do in his later books and chapters as well. Bede first recounts a fascinating and apparently quite fabulous story about the arrival in Ireland of Picts sailing from Scythia in search of a new homeland. He then makes

[25] 'The Man Who Had No Story to Tell', as told by Willie MacPhee, in Sheila Douglas, *The King o the Black Art and Other Folk Tales* (Aberdeen, 1987), pp. 67–69 (p. 67). For another Scottish version, see Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger, *Till Doomsday in the Afternoon: The Folklore of a Family of Scots Travellers, the Stewarts of Blairgowrie* (Manchester, 1986), pp. 80–83 ('The Laddie That Became a Lass', as told by Belle Stewart).

[26] Verse 15a of the OE poem known as *Durham*, in Dobbie, p. 27.

[27] John McNamara, 'Bede's Role in Circulating Legend in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*', *ASSAH*, 7 (1994), 61–69 (pp. 61 and 63).

the improbable assertion (to our way of thought) that no reptile is capable of surviving in Ireland, 'for although serpents have often been brought from Britain, as soon as the ship approaches land they are affected by the scent of the air and quickly perish'.[28] If by the end of book 3 of his history — even after reading his quasi-mythic account of the English Conquest and his punning story of the English slave-boys in the market-place in Rome[29] — one has not yet come to appreciate Bede's skill as a raconteur, one might dwell for a while on his elaborate account there of the vision of Fursa (bk 3, ch. 19). As a holy man of Ireland (Bede reports), Fursa settled in East Anglia so as to found a monastery there. On two occasions he had an extended out-of-body experience during which he was permitted to witness the joys of the angelic hosts while also suffering the fierce onslaughts of evil spirits who sought to prevent his journey to heaven. Although Bede refers to an unknown *Life of Fursa* (probably of Irish origin) as his main source for his knowledge of that man, he also makes clear that it was through oral tradition that he knew of the full substance of Fursa's visions:

> Superest adhuc frater quidam senior monasterii nostri, qui narrare solet dixisse sibi quendam multum ueracem ac religiosum hominem, quod ipsum Furseum uiderit in prouincia Orientalium Anglorum, illasque uisiones ex ipsius ore audierit, adiciens quia tempus hiemis fuerit acerrimum et glacie constrictum, cum sedens in tenui ueste uir ita inter dicendum propter magnitudinem memorati timoris uel suauitatis quasi in mediae aestatis caumate sudauerit.
>
> (An aged brother is still living in our monastery [that is, Jarrow] who is wont to relate that a most truthful and pious man told him that he had seen Fursa himself in the kingdom of the East Angles and had heard these visions from his own mouth. He added that although it was during a time of severe winter weather and a hard frost and though Fursa sat wearing only a thin garment, yet as he told his story, he sweated as though it were the middle of summer, either because of the terror or else the joy which his recollections aroused.)[30]

Bede's narrative of 'the Vision of Fursa' is not only a flamboyant example of a narrative genre (the 'otherworld journey') that is still popular today after having

[28] 'Nam saepe illo de Brittania adlati serpentes, mox ut proximante terris nauigio odore aeris illius adtacti fuerint, intereunt': Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 18–19.

[29] At pp. 16–18 above I characterize Bede's account of the *adventus Saxonum* as a creative one. As for his famous story of the English slave-boys in Rome, with its onomastic punning on *Angli* and *angeli*, *Deira* and *de ira*, and *Ælle* and *alleluia* (Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 132–35), wordplay of this kind is 'a common feature in early Irish narratives (both vernacular and Latin), with some claiming that it derives from, or is heavily influenced by, Isidore of Seville's etymologizing style' (personal communication from Colin Ireland, 25 May 2005).

[30] Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 274–75, with their translation.

been a narrative staple of the Middle Ages.[31] It is also an example of the kind of narrative that a folklorist would call a 'friend-of-a-friend' tale (a 'FOAF-tale'): that is, it is a story that Bede says he heard from a close personal acquaintance ('an aged brother') who heard it from someone else of impeccable credentials ('a most truthful and pious man'). This man in turn heard it from the Irishman Fursa himself, who is both the topic of the story and its ultimate and unimpeachable source. It is precisely this kind of strategic linking-to and distancing-from the putative source of a 'true' story that is characteristic of modern urban legends as a genre. These are narratives that, as folklorists are aware, need not be either modern in their date or urban in their location, but that have the power to shock and, often, amuse their audiences through their account of real-world experiences that are just a shade 'too good to be true'.[32]

So as not to be misunderstood, I should emphasize that I am not claiming that what Bede told when he recounted the 'Vision of Fursa' was a prototypical urban legend. Nor do I wish to claim, more importantly, that Bede's story of Cædmon is either 'the source' of Irish tale-type 2412B or an early specimen of that narrative type (though it comes close to being one). On the contrary, what we are dealing with in each of these instances is what the Celticist R. Mark Scowcroft has called 'abstract narrative patterns'.[33] These are 'thematic cores' or 'narrative archetypes' that can be given concrete embodiment by different authors or storytellers in any number of different ways depending on such factors as genre, audience, ideology, and historical period. No two such tales will be alike, whatever their structural affinities may be. When we think in terms of 'source' and 'derivative', 'tale-type' and 'example', our conceptual categories are perhaps somewhat more constrained than they need be. The point that I wish to make is that a given story not only can

[31] Carol Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times* (Oxford, 1987), provides a bibliography of primary sources (pp. 248–54) and secondary ones (pp. 254–57) relating to medieval examples of this extremely popular narrative genre, of which Bede's account of the 'Vision of Dryhthelm' (from bk 5, ch. 12 of his *Historia*) was an influential example.

[32] For a concise account of this narrative genre, see Jan Harold Brunvand, 'Urban Legend', in *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by Brunvand (New York, 1996), pp. 730–31. Brunvand defines the urban legend as 'an apocryphal contemporary story, told as true but incorporating traditional motifs, and usually attributed to a friend of a friend (FOAF)'. He notes that some modern urban legends 'may have ancient and/or rural prototypes' (p. 730). One of the more recent and comprehensive of Brunvand's many anthologies of these tales is *Too Good to be True: The Colossal Book of Urban Legends* (New York, 1999).

[33] R. Mark Scowcroft, 'Abstract Narrative in Ireland', *Ériu*, 46 (1995), 121–58.

be perceived as standing alone as a unique statement pertaining to its own time and place, but also, in all its individuality, can be seen to participate in an ongoing, collective process by which reality itself is perceived (and, even, experienced) according to recurrent narrative patterns. In my discussion of Bede's Cædmon, I have tried to apply that principle with as much specificity as possible.

Conclusion: The Scholar as Storyteller

We are accustomed to honouring the author of the *Ecclesiastical History* as 'Bede the Scholar' — surely the most learned biblical exegete of his day.[34] One has no difficulty thinking of that same man as 'Bede the Educator', for he was generous in seeing that his knowledge was put to others' use.[35] To one of his admirers living in the late Anglo-Saxon period, Byrhtferth of Ramsey, Bede deserved praise as both 'the venerable Astronomer' and 'the noble Computist'.[36] Perhaps the time is not far away when 'Bede the Storyteller' will receive his due share of honour as well; for in that capacity too he excelled, so much as to deserve respect as, with the *Beowulf* poet, one of the two premier storytellers we know of from the Anglo-Saxon era.

[34] P. Meyvaert, 'Bede the Scholar', in *Famulus Christi: Essays in Commemoration of the Thirteenth Centenary of the Birth of the Venerable Bede*, ed. by Gerald Bonner (London, 1976), pp. 40–69.

[35] George Hardin Brown, 'Bede the Educator', Jarrow Lecture for 1996 (Jarrow, 1996). In a brief tribute that runs along similar lines, Byrhtferth of Ramsey refers to Bede as *se æglæca lareow* 'the awesome teacher', using a Beowulfian-style adjective (*āg-lǣce*) that might mean something like 'monstrous good!' if here it is not merely, as has been suspected, a corruption of *ā-glēawa* 'learned in law'. See the *DOE*, s.v. *āg-lǣce* (adj.).

[36] *Byrhtferth's Enchiridion*, ed. by Peter S. Baker and Michael Lapidge (Oxford, 1995), p. 46 (*Beda* [. . .] *astrologus uenerandus*) and p. 48 (*Beda* [. . .] *se arwurða rimcræftiga*).

Chapter 9

Heaney's *Beowulf* Six Years Later

When the person who is arguably the poet of greatest stature in the English-speaking world at the present time takes it upon himself to translate the finest literary monument that comes down to us from England before the age of Chaucer, then the results are likely to be found interesting.

The publication of Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* in 1999–2000 has to be regarded as a 'millennial event' in Old English studies. This translation has now reached a wide audience after having appeared on various best-seller lists, having won the Whitbread Award for the best book of the year, and having been

I wish to express my debt to a group of colleagues at the University of Wisconsin, Madison (Heather Dubrow, Lynn Keller, Cyrena Pondrom, Eric Rothstein, Thomas Schaub, and Jeffrey Steele), who, as members of a congenial organization known as the Draft Group, offered criticisms on a preliminary draft of this chapter. I am also grateful for comments I received when presenting oral versions of it at the University of California at Davis, the University of Santa Clara, and the Modern Language Association of America at its 1999 annual convention.

When I wrote the present chapter, I was not aware that Inge B. Mitfull and Hans Sauer had recently published a substantial article, "Seamus Heaney: Ulster, Old English, and *Beowulf*", in *Bookmarks from the Past: Studies* [. . .] *Helmut Gneuss*, ed. by Lucia Kornexl and Ursula Lenker (Frankfurt am Main, 2003), pp. 81–141, that comes to very similar conclusions regarding the virtues of Heaney's translation. Moreover, those authors and I have taken a similar path to our conclusions, making reference to the shape of Heaney's career as a poet, to his bold choices as regards diction, to his freedom in reconfiguring the syntax of his source, and to his use of Old English allusions in his collection *Electric Light*. The justification for publishing the present chapter is therefore less compelling than I had thought. Since my chapter differs from that article in regard to a number of details, however, there is reason to let it stand, especially if it will contribute to a new and more positive assessment of Heaney's work among fellow Anglo-Saxonists. I am grateful to Professor Sauer for sending me a copy of his and Mitfull's article before I had access to the festschrift in which it appeared.

enshrined in the newest edition of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* in addition to being published in three other editions.[1] It has scarcely been exempt from controversy, however. During the months before it was published, news of its imminent release set the lines of electronic communication buzzing on Ansaxnet, an electronic bulletin board used by many Anglo-Saxonists. One author of an admired critical book on *Beowulf* found the translation 'flaccid'.[2] Another specialist spread the word that, as she had previously written in a letter to the editors of *TLS*, no teacher need be held in 'the shackles imposed by Heaney's dominance':

> Norton, running scared because of American professors' resistance to Heaney's *Beowulf*, is offering a 'package deal', in which professors can order the new *Norton Anthology* together with a separate, non-Heaney, *Beowulf* paperback at no extra cost to their students.[3]

This person clearly assumed that many of her colleagues would prefer to use some other translation. Indeed, the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* is adopted in so many classrooms that concerns along such lines are understandable, as long as one concurs that 'Heaneywulf' (as it has playfully been called) is a pedagogical disaster.

My own response to Heaney's translation is different and far more favourable. In fact, I will go so far as to express my opinion that Heaney's version of *Beowulf* (as issued in the 2000 North American trade edition published by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux and subsequently reissued in paperback by Norton) is the most

[1] *Beowulf*, trans. by Seamus Heaney, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th edn, ed. by M. H. Abrams and others (New York, 2000), I, 29–99; *Beowulf*, trans. by Seamus Heaney (London, 1999); Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (New York, 2000), henceforth abbreviated 'Heaney's *Beowulf*'. My citations of Heaney's text are taken from this edition. The translation is reprinted in a Norton Critical Edition titled *Beowulf: A Verse Translation*, ed. by Daniel Donoghue (New York, 2002). A recording of Heaney reading four excerpts from his translation is included on the CD-ROM Media Companion to *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. I (New York, 2001). A CD and a two-cassette recording of a reading of the whole translation have been issued under the title *Beowulf: The Original BBC Recording Read by Seamus Heaney* (St Paul, *c.* 2000).

[2] Electronic communication of October 1999: 'The new Norton sits open on my desk, and I am as underwhelmed as could be by this new flaccid Beowulf.' I will preserve the anonymity of the writer, who was not communicating his considered opinion with thoughts of publication in mind.

[3] Randi Eldevik, electronic communication of 23 November 1999, quoting from her letter to *TLS* published on 5 November 1999. The 'non-Heaney' Norton Critical Edition to which Eldevik refers has since appeared in print: this is *Beowulf: A Prose Translation*, ed. by Nicholas Howe (New York, 2002) featuring a translation by E. Talbot Donaldson. *Beowulf* thus enjoys unique status as the only work of English literature to be published in two different Norton Critical Editions in the same year.

successful presentation that has yet been made of an Old English poem in the form of a modern English verse translation. By 'successful', what I am alluding to is not box-office sales, nor yet the handsome physical appearance of the book. Rather, it is Heaney's production of a 'strong' version of *Beowulf* for our time: that is, a rewriting of the poem that is artful enough to stand on its own and be savoured in its own right while also being used with profit by persons who want to have faith that what they are reading is a close approximation of 'what the text says'.[4]

One ingredient of the success of Heaney's translation is the introduction in which he discusses *Beowulf* and the process by which he came to translate that poem. These few pages of prose, which are excluded from the *Norton Anthology* for lack of space, are crafted every bit as elegantly as the translation that follows them. Contributing yet more significantly to the success of Heaney's translation in its American stand-alone editions is the presentation of his version in an en face dialogue with the Old English text.[5] Since none of the other editions includes the original text, the readers of those publications have no immediate opportunity to see what Heaney has done with the text (or at least, if they have not studied the original language, to make educated guesses in that direction). Teachers who hesitate to use Heaney's translation on its own ought to be more comfortable in assigning it as one half of a diptych representing 'the old *Beowulf*' and 'the new', two ports between which commerce can take place. They might even entertain the hope that a few of their students, stimulated by this encounter with the original language of the poem, would be motivated to undertake a more systematic study of Old English.

A third factor contributing to the success of Heaney's version of *Beowulf* is that the translator was kept on a leash while working on it. The keeper of the leash was Professor Emeritus Alfred David of Indiana University. Whenever Heaney yearned and ached to improve the poem by adding things that the *Beowulf* poet had somehow neglected to say, Professor David was there to rein him in. This

[4] In 'Rewriting *Beowulf*: The Task of Translation', *College English*, 55 (1993), 858–78, I review some theoretical aspects of the art of translation and compare how four different translators and one editor handle a particular passage of *Beowulf*. I therefore do not repeat that same ground here. In that article I argue that any translation of a literary work inevitably involves a significant rewriting of it, so that translators who seek to do justice to that work have some license to be forthright about producing a 'strong' version for their own time.

[5] The OE text is that of *Beowulf with the Finnesburg Fragment*, ed. by C. L. Wrenn and W. F. Bolton, 3rd edn (Exeter, 1988). Quotations from *Beowulf* in the present chapter refer to that edition.

point is worth a moment's consideration. In a review of Heaney's translation published in 2000, Nicholas Howe makes the plausible comment that 'Heaney's *Beowulf* would have been far more exciting if it had followed the practice of Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, and traveled the full and exhilarating distance from translation to poetic remaking'. He then asks, 'Why didn't Heaney do so?'.[6] Heaney must have asked himself the same question. Left to himself he would surely have taken a path along those more creative lines, as he had done in his earlier translations from Old Irish (*Sweeny Astray*, 1983), from the ancient Greek of Sophocles (*The Cure at Troy*, 1991), and from Dante and other poets. As he made clear at a 1999 symposium in which he conversed about the art of translating poetry, he was not always fully pleased by the results of his own somewhat constrained labours:

> In my original version, I had a line which I was delighted with, which I would have wished to keep. The boat, it said, stood in the harbor, 'clad with ice, its cables tightening'.[7] There are no cables in the Anglo-Saxon of course, but I felt that this is *ut-fus*, you know, ready to move. Then my censor came at me and said, 'Come on, take that out, kill your darling. Take out the cables. Lose your lovely tight alliteration.' So I did. I mean it was a sin against the gift, against the grace of the line, but in order to be faithful to the literal sense, I ended up with 'Ice-clad, outbound, a craft for a prince' — fine, it's what's in the line, but it's not as alive, as eager, as *ut-fus*.[8]

In a word, the reason why Heaney was willing to work under these constraints was professionalism. He had been commissioned by W. W. Norton and Co. to produce a version accurate enough to be used in the classroom without censure by specialists, and by hiring Professor David as consultant, Norton did its best to ensure this result. The end product of this process of tug-and-pull is an animated version of the poem that still maintains a high degree of fidelity to the original text, as long as readers understand that what Heaney is striving for in the realms of both lexicon and syntax is *equivalency*, not mirror imaging. Other well-regarded translations of Old English literature fall below the standard of accuracy observed in this edition.[9] Granted, the virtue of mere accuracy can be exaggerated. As R. M.

[6] Nicholas Howe, 'Scullionspeak', *New Republic*, 28 February 2000, pp. 32–37 (p. 36, col. 1).

[7] Here Heaney refers to lines 32–33 of the original text: 'Þær æt hyðe stod hringed-stefna, / isig ond ut-fus, æþelinges fær' [my note].

[8] Seamus Heaney and Robert Hass, *Sounding Lines: The Art of Translating Poetry* (Berkeley, 2000), p. 7 (an occasional publication of the Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities at the University of California, Berkeley).

[9] To cite one example, the value of Kevin Crossley-Holland's *The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology* (published by the Boydell Press in 1982 and reissued by Oxford University Press in

Liuzza has observed, 'a translation is successful or not, not by virtue of its accuracy or fidelity to its indecipherable cause, but by how well it makes the poem seem like a living thing rather than a dead one'.[10] Still, Heaney's aim was to create a work that, while thoroughly stylish, would reflect the *Beowulf* poet's actual words, taking those words clause by clause rather than one by one.

To sum up these prefatory remarks: after having used Heaney's translation half a dozen times in different classroom settings to the pleasure of my students and without more than trivial reservations of my own, I find myself uncomfortable at the thought of its being disparaged as if it were unsuitable for professional use. Admittedly, the diverse judgements of individual members of an audience concerning the merits of a performance can easily fall into the category of taste. I will therefore not make a systematic effort to refute the negative responses to this translation that have been articulated by others.[11] Instead, I will advance a few

1984 and 1999) is diminished by problems that are substantive and far too frequent for an instructor's comfort. In the first line of *The Wanderer*, for example, the exiled person does not 'plead for pity', as one reads in Crossley-Holland's translation (p. 50); rather, he 'lives to experience grace'. More significantly, the last seventeen lines of *The Seafarer* are silently omitted as, presumably, having no bearing on the 'true' poem that is imagined to underlie the manuscript text. The reason I mention these specifics is not to disparage Crossley-Holland's work, which is admirable in many respects, but rather to emphasize that nothing so unreliable is found in Heaney's translation.

[10] R. M. Liuzza, 'Lost in Translation: Some Versions of *Beowulf* in the Nineteenth Century', *English Studies*, 83 (2002), 281–95 (p. 295). I am grateful to Professor Liuzza, a first-rate translator of *Beowulf* himself, for having sent me a copy of this survey in advance of its publication. Liuzza's own translation *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (published by Broadview Press, 2000), has found praise in many quarters. Frank Kermode compares it favourably with Heaney's in ch. 1, 'The Modern Beowulf' (pp. 1–12), of his book *Pleasing Myself: From Beowulf to Philip Roth* (London, 2001). Kermode concludes that each of these two translations has its merits: 'Since each book in its way enriches the pleasure to be had from the poem, the best plan is to buy them both' (p. 12) — or, perhaps, to teach from them both. Hans Sauer, 'Heaneywulf, Liuzzawulf: Two Recent Translations of *Beowulf*', in *Of Remembraunce the Keye* [Festschrift Karl Heinz Göller], ed. by Uwe Böker (Frankfurt am Main, 2004), pp. 331–48, makes a detailed, point by point comparison of these two translations and likewise finds much to praise in each.

[11] In many ways the most thoughtful, carefully formulated, and withering of these reviews is Howell Chickering's 'Beowulf and "Heaneywulf"', *Kenyon Review*, n.s., 24 (2002), 160–78. Like many of his colleagues who specialize in Old English literature, Chickering is of two minds about the translation. On one hand he grants that 'passage after passage', particularly of the dramatic speeches, 'delivers the sense and tone of the Old English with effortless grace' (p. 162), while 'Heaney's mode of translation often works exceptionally well in narrative passages' (p. 164). He also finds that Heaney establishes 'a *decorum* of language that accords well with the heroic dignity of the Old English' (p. 167, his emphasis). On the other hand, Chickering calls attention to what

positive reasons why teachers and students of English literature can be grateful for the existence of such a stunningly artful work of the literary imagination as this. To me, there is no question that Heaney's *Beowulf* will have a place in future histories of English literature when myriad other translations of that poem are forgotten, and this will be both because of its merits as a work of art and because it is Heaney who wrote it.

Before looking at specific aspects of Heaney's translation, however, I wish to address the question of his credentials for undertaking it, for one of the questions raised among specialists in the fall of 1999 concerned that point.

Translation as Vocation: 'Lie Down in the Word Hoard'

'What makes Heaney think he is qualified to take on this task?' was a question implied by some of the messages circulating on Ansaxnet at the time of its initial publication. The authority of Heaney's version of *Beowulf* was questioned in the same breath as the authority of the work of persons who have translated Korean, or Polish, or Japanese verse into English without having a first-hand knowledge of the source language. This negative response, I suspect, may stem from a lack of interest or knowledge concerning Heaney's intellectual background and, indeed, his vocation as a poet; for it strikes me with crystalline clarity that at the time he undertook his commission to translate *Beowulf*, Heaney was the poet of stature writing in English who was *best* credentialed to take on that task.

When one speaks of Heaney's credentials for such an undertaking, one should first of all give reasonable weight to his higher education at Queen's University, Belfast, where he completed with a 'first' what was then the standard concentra-

he regards as 'shopworn phrases' and wording that 'smacks of journalese' (p. 163); he too uses the adjective 'flaccid' (p. 165); he speaks of 'overwrought images' and 'clunky over-alliterations' in addition to 'dull stretches' (p. 167); he finds 'clichés', 'verbal overkill', and 'chummily colloquial' phrasing (p. 168); he is displeased by instances of what he considers 'head-wagging sententiousness' as well as a 'jazzy tone' (p. 170). As if that were not enough to condemn Heaney's work to oblivion, he points out that 'there are no Irish words in the Old English poem, and it does a disservice to students to make it look like there is an amalgam of Irish and English in the original poem' (p. 173). He concludes that there is nothing better or worse about this verse translation than about many others: 'Other translations of *Beowulf* will continue to appear as the 2000s roll along, and among them English teachers will find equally good translations, of mixed success, to choose from' (p. 177). I quote from this article at some length because I believe it may represent something of a consensus position among Anglo-Saxonists, as well as reflecting Chickering's individual taste.

tion in English philology.[12] This course of studies included three years of work in medieval English language and literature and in the history of the English language. By the time that he earned his undergraduate degree at Queens, Heaney had studied Old English language and literature more intently than all but a small number North American graduate students now do on their way to earning the PhD in English. This is not to say that he and his fellow students at Queens were necessarily delving into that early literature in depth, but their philological training would have been beyond reproach, and Heaney was at the top of his class in his chosen specialization. Any comparisons of his version of *Beowulf* with second-hand translations made from exotic languages via intermediary 'trots' may safely be put aside.

More importantly (as others have recognized), Heaney's work on *Beowulf* represents the culmination of an intellectual trajectory that began with his first book of poems, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966).[13] At the time his *Beowulf* translation was published, it fit into his overall oeuvre as neatly as the capstone of an arch fits onto its supporting elements. We may think first of all of his prior achievements as a translator of poetry. This form of apprenticeship allowed Heaney to escape from the more insular aspects of his training and to experiment, through a regime of ventriloquism, with some bolder voices than were his by birth. When speaking of Heaney's intellectual trajectory, however, what I am chiefly referring to is his original verse on northern themes. Throughout the period 1966–99, at times intermittently and at times in a sustained manner, Heaney was making a serious

[12] That is, Heaney completed his studies with a grade of highest distinction, an evaluation that normally opens the path toward postgraduate studies at one of the prestigious universities of the U.K.

[13] Howe, 'Scullionspeak', p. 36, makes this point about Heaney's prior engagement with Old English poetic themes. He calls attention to Heaney's use of the story of Cædmon in a piece he wrote for the funeral of the English poet Ted Hughes and in his poem 'Whitby-sur-Moyola', from *The Spirit Level* (London, 1996). Joseph McGowan, 'Heaney, Cædmon, *Beowulf*', *New Hibernia Review*, 6.2 (2002), 25–42, writes at some length about the importance of Cædmon in Heaney's personal mythology and speaks of his translation of *Beowulf* as a work that will be seen as 'the natural culmination of a trajectory Heaney had been set on seemingly his whole poetic career' (p. 27). Daniel Donoghue, 'The Philologer Poet: Seamus Heaney and the Translation of *Beowulf*', *Harvard Review*, 19 (fall 2000), 12–21, writes of the important place, in Heaney's original poetry, of the kinds of compound diction and metaphoric diction that he absorbed through his reading of *Beowulf* and other Old English verse. Donoghue rightly emphasizes (at p. 21) that 'the many affinities already existing' between Heaney's poetry and *Beowulf* prepared the way for this translation.

effort to incorporate into his poetry themes relating to the early cultures of the British Isles and north-west Europe so as to set those themes into relation with present-day realities.

In the poem that prefaces *Death of a Naturalist*, 'Digging', Heaney first advanced the archaeological metaphor that has since been one of his guiding tropes:

> Between my finger and my thumb
> The squat pen rests.
> I'll dig with it.[14]

Much as his father dug with a spade, cutting turf and planting potatoes in the fields of the family's farm at Mossbawn, county Derry, Heaney will dig with his pen, he claims. Using that tool with precision in poem after poem, he has subsequently succeeded in laying bare a number of layers of the cultural ground where modern Ireland has its origins.

In his early poems 'Bann Clay' and 'Bogland' (both from *Door into the Dark*, 1969) and 'Bog Oak' (from *Wintering Out*, 1972), Heaney meditates upon some Mesolithic flints, on the bones of a Great Irish Elk, and on some slabs of prehistoric oak wood retrieved from the peat bogs of Ulster, respectively. His engagement with the physical traces of former civilizations is quite literally an archaeological enterprise based on the study of objects now preserved in museum settings. More ambitiously, in 'Funeral Rites' (from his pivotal collection *North*, 1975), Heaney juxtaposes references to the funerals of the victims of recent IRA and Provisional Army killings with a meditation on the funeral processions of Neolithic times that he imagines to have once wound their way towards the great chambered tombs in the valley of the river Boyne. In this same poem, weaving together past and present rhythms of violence and grief, he calls to mind the legendary blood-feud that eventually counted among its victims Gunnar of Hlíðarend, the Viking Age farmer-warrior whose feud with neighbouring chieftains plays a central role in *Njál's Saga*. Gunnar appears in Heaney's poem, as he does in that thirteenth-century saga, as a noble and sympathetic victim of a vortex of violence in which he previously had taken a willing part. In some sense, Gunnar was able to transcend the ethics of vengeance through his refusal to accept his legally imposed exile for his role in that feud, choosing rather to remain in Iceland at his farm at Hlíðarend in full knowledge of the probable consequences of that choice. Heaney writes of the dead Gunnar as follows:

[14] Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966–1996* (New York, 1998), pp. 3–4 (p. 4). Henceforth in this chapter this work is abbreviated *OG*.

> [. . . Gunnar] lay beautiful
> inside his burial mound,
> though dead by violence
> and unavenged.[15]

'Beautiful though unavenged'. The wording here invites contemplation, for Heaney's purpose in this poem is to comment on both past and present habits of violence. He thereby resists the modern tendency to view the Troubles in Northern Ireland (or, for that matter, civil strife in any other region of the contemporary world) as no more than a function of local politics. Heaney's committed resistance to the ethics of vengeance coexists with his acknowledgment of the roots of social violence in the ancestral past.

Nowhere is the depth of Heaney's engagement with the early cultures of north-west Europe more evident than in 'North', the title poem of the exceptionally powerful and inventive collection of poems he brought out in 1975, one year before his self-imposed exile from the United Kingdom. Here, in what might be called his personal homage to Bede's tale of Cædmon (to which he refers elsewhere several times in his writings as well), he relates a story of his own poetic vocation. Heaney locates this pseudo-autobiographical fantasy at the shore of western Ireland, in a region famed as much for its destitution and sorrows as for its numinous beauty. Standing by the Atlantic Ocean, hearing the surf of 'the hammered curve of a bay', he imagines himself to be in the presence of a Viking longship — one of the slender, supple vessels that were sometimes referred to as 'dragons'. This apparitional ship then speaks to him as if it were a messenger from some other world. What it commands Heaney to do is to 'lie down / in the word-hoard, burrow / the coil and gleam / of your furrowed brain' (*OG*, pp. 98–99). The same metaphor of tilling that he uses in his poem 'Digging' is varied here with imperative force: 'burrow'. The underlying image has changed, however, and is now both more passive and more draconian than it is agrarian or archaeological. The wording here is suggestive of immersion, burial, perhaps even a death-like state like hibernation. Whatever exact role Heaney is being called for, to whatever use he is to be put in his future career, he is commanded to become like a dragon occupying its barrow, an embodiment of longevity as well as implacable resolve.

Importantly, this imagined call for Heaney to take possession of the treasured resources of his own mind is conjoined with a call to stake a claim on language. He is to lie down not in the earth, but rather in the 'word-hoard'. What that Old

[15] *OG*, p. 97. McGowan, 'Heaney, Cædmon, *Beowulf*', pp. 33–34, offers a somewhat different reading of this poem.

English kenning primarily denotes is the poetic lexicon of the earliest English poets. By using the term 'word-hoard', Heaney implies that the great task lying before him is not only to cultivate a personal voice, but also to incorporate into his own language the voice of ancient eloquence in English verse, harkening back many centuries to a time when the poet was spokesman for the tribe.

The rigours and hazards involved in the challenge that Heaney poses for himself need no pointing out. Heaney might well have shown himself rebelling at this command, rather like Cædmon responding 'But I cannot sing!' when his mysterious visitor confronted him in a dream. But 'North' ends with neither complaint nor denial. It seems that Heaney accepts the terms of the vocation whose terms are spelled out here, even if only in sibylline enigmas.

Both in *North* and in his subsequent books of verse, Heaney has heeded that imagined call in any number of ways. In 'Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces' (from *North*) he writes at length of the Vikings, those 'neighbourly, score-taking / killers', focusing attention on the interlaced zoomorphic designs carved into some pieces of Viking Age bone that are now on exhibit in the National Museum, Dublin (*OG*, pp. 100–03). Taking up the metaphor that he introduced in 'Digging', he likens his hand holding a pen to the hand of a medieval scribe, and he then relates that image to the hand of a master carver, a worker in bone. Developing similar imagery in a more ambitious fashion in his long poem 'Bone Dreams' from the same collection (*OG*, pp. 104–07), Heaney first contemplates a single item of the Old English word-hoard, *bān-hūs* 'bone-house'. This kenning, as any Anglo-Saxonist knows, denotes the body seen as a house made of bones. Intrigued with this 'skeleton' word that he has discovered in 'the tongue's / old dungeons' — that is, literally, in the Old English grammar and reader on his desk, where all 'the coffered / riches of grammar /and declensions' can be found — Heaney responds to an imagined call to 'come back past / philology and kennings'. The next major image in the poem is that of his hands caressing the body of a beloved woman. In a manner reminiscent of the mythic trope of 'Mother Ireland' (and that also recalls the writings of the great Scots Gaelic poet Sorley MacLean, whose work Heaney was reading at this time), this imagined woman is then identified with the physical contours of the British Isles. Like prehistoric Gaia herself seen in an insular manifestation, 'she' becomes a landscape including scree slopes, ancient earthworks, and a strategically located Maiden Castle. In this poem Heaney expresses his desire to revert to a diction as ancient as 'the scop's / twang, the iron / flash of consonants / cleaving the line'. This language needs no explication to anyone familiar with the Old English word for 'poet' and with the alliterative metre that determines the two half-lines of Old Germanic verse.

In his prose-poem 'The Wanderer' (from *Stations*, 1975), Heaney directly plays off the title of one of the most famous elegies of the Exeter Book. Speaking in the first-person singular voice and juxtaposing two imagined moments in time (as the speakers of the Old English elegies frequently do), he tells of an Irish student's joy in his 'ring-giver': that is, his teacher in a country schoolhouse. The 'ring-giver' has presented him with a silver coin or medal as a token of outstanding scholarship. Years later, a career that has taken the youth far from his rural homeland has turned into a cause for lament. The same speaker, now burdened with the wisdom of experience, contemplates the bitterness of a life of migrant solitude during which he has seen 'halls in flames, hearts in cinders, the benches filled and emptied' (*OG*, p. 86). While the imagery here is reminiscent of the Old English elegy 'The Wanderer', it also calls to mind the desolate mood of the more elegiac parts of *Beowulf*. If one reads this poem as a statement embodying personal experience, it is natural to see it as embodying his disillusionment with contemporary British politics, an attitude that soon (in 1976) was to lead him to take up permanent residence in the Republic of Ireland.[16]

The most compelling record of Heaney's intellectual engagement with the late Iron Age culture that is represented in fictive guise in *Beowulf* is his sequence of poems on the bog people of ancient Denmark. In 'The Tollund Man' (published in *Wintering Out*) and in the subsequent poems 'Bog Queen', 'The Grauballe Man', 'Punishment', 'Strange Fruit', and 'Kinship' (all from his landmark collection *North*), Heaney contemplates the well-preserved bodies of men and women who may have been the victims of ancient sacrificial violence.[17] These striking poems have been the subject of much discussion elsewhere,[18] and so my review of them can be brief. Heaney's almost obsessively precise account of the grotesque,

[16] Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (Iowa City, 1993), notes that this poem portrays the pleasure of Heaney's teacher, Bernard Murphy, at Anahorish School, when Heaney won a scholarship to St Columb's College, 'but also shows the adult's recognition that it was a triumph which began his exile from Mossbawn', his childhood home.

[17] Heaney's initial inspiration for these poems was his reading of P. V. Glob's book *The Bog People*, trans. by Rupert Bruce-Mitford (London, 1969). Later, in a kind of personal pilgrimage, he visited sites in Jutland where the bodies of these Iron Age victims are on display. Heaney had already written about bog finds from Ireland, but no human bodies had been recovered there that were as well preserved and evocative as the sensational finds in Denmark.

[18] See for example Jon Stallworthy, 'The Poet as Archaeologist: W. B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney', *Review of English Studies*, n.s., 33 (1982), 158–74; Henry Hart, 'History, Myth, and Apocalypse in Seamus Heaney's *North*', *Contemporary Literature*, 30 (1989), 387–411; and Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), pp. 33–35 and 39–55.

sometimes mutilated bodies of these victims provides the basis for a meditation on the social logic of brutality and human suffering. One is reminded of Rembrandt's famous painting *Aristotle Contemplating the Skull of Homer* or Shakespeare's Hamlet contemplating a skull turned up by a Danish gravedigger,[19] but neither parallel provides more than a loose precedent for Heaney's achievement. One of his main points, always understood though never made explicit, is that modern sectarian politics too have their ritualistic dimension. Statesmen or negotiators who try put an end to a spiral of sectarian violence by appeals to reason and self-interest, he implies, may be ignoring its atavistic character. Seen from this perspective, reciprocal acts of killing can be likened to social rituals that continue to be enacted by a community long after their causes have been forgotten. While this aspect of Heaney's response to the Troubles has been criticized in some quarters as providing an apology for current violence by suggesting its inevitability,[20] it is worth stressing that Heaney never stakes out political quietism as a position to be either defended or attacked. Rather, he presents the eternal return of the unwanted past as a tragic process, whether or not it is found instructive.[21]

To sum up my main point thus far, Heaney is scarcely to be regarded as some kind of interloper on Beowulfian turf. As a poet with respectable training in Old English language and literature as well as a sustained intellectual engagement with the roots of Irish culture in the early Middle Ages and in prehistory, Heaney has probed that earlier era in poem after poem. Moreover, in his pivotal poem 'North', Heaney has advanced the bold conceit that his vocation as a poet is dependent upon his ability to claim possession of the 'word-hoard' of the earliest English verse.

[19] This is an image Heaney used of himself in a self-deprecating manner in part 4 of 'Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces' (*OG*, p. 102):

> I am Hamlet the Dane,
> skull-handler, parablist,
> smeller of rot
> in the state, [. . .]
> coming to consciousness
> by jumping in graves,
> dithering, blathering.

[20] Representative of this tenor of response to *North* is Ciaran Carson's review of that volume, 'Escaped from the Massacre?', *Honest Ulsterman*, 50 (1975), 183–86. Carson goes so far as to speak of Heaney as a 'laureate of violence — a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing, an apologist for "the situation"' (p. 183).

[21] For the sake of economy I will pass over Heaney's poem 'Whitby-sur-Moyola' (from *The Spirit Level*, 1996), for it is discussed by Howe, 'Scullionspeak', p. 36.

That claim is worth closer examination. Before discussing a few specific passages drawn from Heaney's translation, I will therefore address one of the most controversial features of that work, his use of unusual diction.

From 'Swamp-thing' to 'Kesh': On Politics and the Lectio Difficilior

As is well known, Heaney's native tongue is an educated version of the dialect of English spoken in rural Ulster, a region that is largely Catholic in religion and Irish nationalist in cultural sympathies. His language has never fit the BBC standard, nor could it be mistaken for the language of poets who cultivate either ultra-sophisticated or coarse registers of English to the exclusion of the dignified middle voice that Heaney has long admired and has often employed.[22] Despite relatively short-term appointments at the University of California at Berkeley, Harvard University, and Oxford University, Heaney has lived his life largely outside the academy. That choice has been a conscious one on his part, not a matter of opportunities, and it is one that has allowed him to cultivate a distinctive voice as a cosmopolitan man of letters who at the same time, as he has put it half playfully, does not mind courting the danger of 'fetishizing' his local roots.[23]

As has often been noted, persons who speak something other than standard English as their birth tongue are far more likely, as adults, to have a sustained regard for words and phrases that depart from the norm. This is certainly true of Heaney, who is fond of the *lectio difficilior* in his own verse even at the cost of stumping his readers. Certainly he is the only contemporary poet whose work I generally read with a copy of the *Oxford English Dictionary* at my side, put to frequent use.

[22] In *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* (New York, 1994), Bernard O'Donoghue has argued that 'the mixed language of the "middle voice" is central to Heaney's technique' (p. 91), and he identifies this middle voice as 'a mixed diction which is used to mediate between local and standard usage' (p. 104). An example of an American poet who is respected for his use of a personal version of the 'middle voice' is Robert Frost, whose work Heaney studied in depth while at Queens. There is a huge difference, however, between Frost's diction (or that of Heaney's early poetry) and the almost lurid, expressionist vocabulary that Heaney deploys at times in his *Beowulf* translation. That difference reflects more explosive influences, including that of the nineteenth-century English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose style was transformed by his encounters with medieval English alliterative verse.

[23] I refer to Heaney's 1995 Nobel Lecture 'Crediting Poetry', in *OG*, pp. 415–30 (p. 425).

In his introduction to his translation of *Beowulf*, Heaney claims that an 'enabling note' for his poetry was provided (albeit unknowingly) by the voices of men of his father's generation, called to mind here as the 'big-voiced Scullions' in honour of a family from his neighbourhood that went by that name:

> A simple sentence such as 'We cut the corn to-day' took on immense dignity when [they] spoke it. They had a kind of Native American solemnity of utterance, as if they were announcing verdicts rather than making small talk.[24]

The cadences of Ulster vernacular speech, Heaney tells us, thus prepared him for the task of finding an apt equivalent to the sententious modes of speech that figure so prominently in *Beowulf*. Indeed, Heaney discovered that certain Ulster dialect words go right back to Old English roots that were never superceded in that region. This discovery had a powerful impact on him as he mulled over how to approach his translation. As he writes in his introduction, Heaney eventually came to realize that *Beowulf* is 'part of my voice-right [. . .]. I was born into its language and [. . .] its language was born into me'.[25] While there is no way either to prove or to disprove such a claim, as a credo it represents a major commitment. Like many another declaration of faith or conscience, it represents the harder of two choices. As an expatriate citizen of the United Kingdom who left that country to make his home in Dublin, he could easily, to the accompaniment of adulatory applause, have raised the placard of anti-colonial resistance to 'Anglo-Saxon' cultural hegemonies. This was not his way.

Not just Heaney's Ulster speech patterns, but also his background as witness to a long sequence of atrocities in Northern Ireland during the years 1968–76 put him in an unusual position to undertake this translation. I have already referred to his 'insider's' knowledge of killing as an act of will, undertaken ritualistically and without remorse. In his Nobel Lecture titled 'Crediting Poetry' (1995), Heaney writes of having undergone the life-altering experience of witnessing atrocious acts perpetrated by righteous men acting on either side of a great moral divide.[26] It is that experience in particular that has attuned him to the elegiac moods of *Beowulf* and the scenes of carnage in that poem.[27] One of the strengths of Heaney's

[24] Heaney's *Beowulf*, p. xxvii. This family name figures prominently in two reviews of Heaney's translation: Tom Shippey, '*Beowulf* for the Big-Voiced Scullions', *TLS*, 1 October 1999, pp. 9–10; Howe, 'Scullionspeak'.

[25] Heaney's *Beowulf*, p. xxiv.

[26] Heaney, 'Crediting Poetry', in *OG*, esp. pp. 419–23.

[27] Cf. Terry Eagleton, *London Review of Books*, 11 November 1999. Eagleton writes of 'the rural-born Heaney's affection for Beowulf 's burnished helmets and four-square, honest-to-

translation is that he asks us to experience the poem's violence as such. At times, when reading this version, one wonders whether one is in Iron Age Scandinavia or contemporary Ulster, or indeed in some other part of the contemporary world where sectarian violence threatens to tear society apart. While the *Beowulf* poet's narrative of blood-vengeance is a heroic tale set in a quasi-mythic era of the past, similar tales of violence will continue to be told, based on real history, as long as 'vengeance for the dead becomes an ethic for the living', as Heaney writes in his introduction.[28] Just as the *Beowulf* poet offered the members of his audience a meditation on the problem of violence in civil society through a narrative fiction set in the remote past, so does Heaney in his own way, in his own time.

So there are reasons, both linguistic and cultural in nature, why Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* sounds different from versions produced closer to London or New York. At the same time, nothing else seems to have raised the hackles of reviewers as much as the spin that Heaney puts on the poem through his use of words of Irish origin or provenance. Examples are 'bawn' (meaning 'fortified keep'), 'sept' (an old word for 'tribe'), 'brehon' (Irish for 'spokesman', corresponding to OE 'thyle'), and 'beyond the pale' (a usage meant to recall the fact that, in colonial Ireland, that phrase referred literally to the palisade that separated the areas of English control from the surrounding countryside, considered as 'wild' from that perspective). In addition, certain details of Heaney's translation may succeed or fail depending on a reader's familiarity with Irish culture. The hero comes 'first-footing' into Hrothgar's hall in the morning; the hall has 'bothies', not mere outbuildings; Beowulf and his men 'press-gang' the thief who stole a cup from a dragon's barrow. A detractor might regard these as stylistic mannerisms. An admirer might say that Heaney's effort to defamiliarize the language of his version of *Beowulf* begins to resemble, in its mixture of difficulty and delight, the language of the original poem; for the *Beowulf* poet's lexicon includes a large number of terms that are difficult to construe even by persons who know Old English well. A number of Old English kennings have a playfully obscure side to them: compound words such as *wind-geard* 'courtyard of the winds', denoting the ocean, or *beadu-lēoma* 'torch of battle', denoting the sword with its flashing blade, or *bān-hūs* 'house made of bones', a kenning for the body (and a word over which Heaney

goodness idiom, its Ulster-like bluffness and blood-spattered benches'. Someone who could speak so condescendingly of Heaney's regional background and so casually of his 'affection' for 'blood-spattered benches' would seem not to care to ascertain what that author's actual attitudes have been in regard to sectarian violence.

[28] Heaney's *Beowulf*, p. xiv.

has meditated, as we have seen). Similarly, Heaney's version of *Beowulf* incorporates both obvious kennings (like 'the frothing wave vat' for 'the sea') and demotic expressions that may require a moment's study before their meaning is worked out (e.g. 'they were a right people', translating OE *wæs seo þeod tilu*, literally 'that was a good people').

In a perceptive article, Conor McCarthy has discussed the artistic and thematic basis for Heaney's choice of words of Irish provenance in his translation. McCarthy speaks of the linguistic tension, verging on rebellion, that has tended to surface in the work of modern Irish writers whose heritage is politically nationalist but who write in English.[29] He rightly points out that Heaney's diction often has a historical dimension to it, as when the word 'bawn' is used so as to call up the idea (quoting Heaney) of 'Edmund Spenser in Kilcolman Castle, reading the early cantos of *The Faerie Queene* to Sir Walter Raleigh, just before the Irish burned the castle and drove Spenser out of Munster back to the Elizabethan court'.[30] For McCarthy, the highly literary texture of Heaney's language contributes to an optimistic spirit that transcends the original poem's dominantly melancholic tone by affirming 'the possibility of the endurance of poetic creation beyond the transience of the suffering that spawns it'.[31] This is an argument worth taking into account, for it engages with the crucial question of what distinguishes the ritualized discourse of poetry from other uses of language. When Heaney uses an archaic dialect word such as 'war-graith' instead of a more transparent term such as 'war-gear' or 'arms', what he is doing is not just putting a northern twist on the poem. For those of his readers with a degree of cultured literacy, he is asserting the enduring legacy of those authors, among whom Shakespeare and Joyce and the *Beowulf* poet himself can prominently be numbered, who have never hesitated to challenge their readers by drawing deep from the cauldron that holds the language of creative expression. Poets of this persuasion tend to have a fondness for an occasional neologism or term of archaic or dialectal origin (such as the archaic word 'graith', one of Spenser's favourites).

The controversy about Heaney's lexicon is not just about aesthetics or fidelity, then. It also regards national identities. It has to do with the cosmopolitan voice versus 'Anglo-Saxon purism' in the language of poetry, as well; and in regard to that debate, Heaney's principles are decidedly catholic.

[29] Conor McCarthy, 'Language and History in Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf*', *English*, 50 (2001), 149–58 (at p. 149).

[30] Heaney's *Beowulf*, p. xxx, quoted by McCarthy, 'Language and History', p. 156.

[31] McCarthy, 'Language and History', p. 157.

Still, the complaint is sometimes voiced that Heaney has hijacked the poem on behalf of an Irish nationalist agenda. As one Anglo-Saxonist has complained, 'I resent what appears to be Heaney's co-opting the poem to reflect his war with the English'.[32] This seems to me a curious remark, for from a staunchly nationalist perspective, what Heaney has done is to betray the Irish cause by celebrating the cultural heritage of England, and I have heard that he has suffered some grief on either side of the river Liffey on that account. At any rate, if Heaney is understood to be saying that this Old English poem *is* Irish in some way, it is only natural for professional Anglo-Saxonists (as well as those who value their Anglo-Saxon heritage in a cultural or racial sense) to resist that claim.

Of course, I do not believe for a minute that Heaney is making the claim that *Beowulf* is Irish. What he is saying is that anyone who is born into the English language, and particularly into a conservative northern form of it like the Ulster dialect, can claim as his or her heritage the great literature of early medieval England, including this poem. Rather than trying to defend Heaney on his own ground, though, what I would point out is that the first claim mentioned above — the claim that *Beowulf* really *is* Irish in some way — is not as irresponsible as may seem. After all, there is a long history of scholarship calling attention to Irish or Celtic elements in *Beowulf*, whether in regard to diction, or thematic content, or larger narrative movements. Granted, there is an equally long history of scholarship that either denies those elements or ignores them, preferring to trace the poem's roots in ancient Scandinavia or Germania or in the Latin, Christian culture of the Middle Ages to the exclusion of all else. Culture wars have been rearing their head on this turf for some while, it seems![33] Although I am not competent to judge the merits of all these arguments regarding sources and influences, I do think it likely that a certain number of Celtic elements became mixed up at some point in the composite soil from which *Beowulf* arose (along with other Old English works, including the charms and such a poem as *The Seafarer*). The word *āglǣca* is a possible case in point;[34] the hero's unusual swimming prowess is

[32] Loren C. Gruber, '"So." So What? It's a Culture War. That's Hwæt! Seamus Heaney's Verse Translation of *Beowulf*, Bilingual and Critical Editions', *In Geardagum*, 23 (2002), 67–84 (p. 80).

[33] The claims of competing nationalisms and regionalisms in the modern reception of *Beowulf* are traced, with a pointed defence of Heaney's 'Ulsterisms', by Alfred David, 'The Nationalities of *Beowulf:* Anglo-Saxon Attitudes', in *Beowulf in Our Time: Teaching Beowulf in Translation*, ed. by Mary K. Ramsey, Old English Newsletter *Subsidia*, 31 (Kalamazoo, 2002), pp. 3–22.

[34] Sherman M. Kuhn, 'Old English *Aglǣc* – Middle Irish *Oclach*', in *Linguistic Method: Essays in Honor of Herbert Penzl*, ed. by Irmengard Rauch and Gerald F. Carr (The Hague, 1979), pp. 213–30.

another;[35] the prominent display of Grendel's severed hand and arm may be a third,[36] among many examples that could be cited.[37] A defender of Heaney's translation might argue, in fact, that its diction merits praise for directing attention not only to the poem's Old Norse affinities (as when he speaks of the 'fells', 'screes', and 'tarns' of the landscape of Grendel's mere), but also to its Celtic connections, thereby bringing out the character of this Old English poem as a kind of epitome of the early cultures of north-west Europe.

Although the Irish element in Heaney's diction lends his work an idiosyncratic turn, it remains an incidental quality whose importance has perhaps been exaggerated. More significantly, Heaney is unabashed in his exploitation of the language of pulp fiction. The hero's great adversary Grendel is 'a powerful demon, a prowler through the dark'; Grendel's mother is a 'tarn-hag', a 'monstrous hell-bride', a 'swamp-thing from hell'. Even more than the original poet, Heaney revels in describing monstrousness per se. He takes evident glee in describing the 'blood-shot waters' of the pool that serves as home to the Grendel creatures after the wounded Grendel has retreated there to die. In Heaney's translation, the waters 'wallowed and surged' with 'loathsome upthrows and overturnings / of waves and gore and wound-slurry' (lines 846–48). Here metre and diction seem to vie with one another in their turbulence.

Heaney's dragon, on the other hand, comes across as a creature that is proud, gorgeous, almost peacock-like. One almost hates to see him die, for

[35] Martin Puhvel, 'The Swimming Prowess of Beowulf', *Folklore*, 82 (1971), 276–80, repr. as ch. 6 of his *Beowulf and Celtic Tradition* (Waterloo, 1979), pp. 55–60. Puhvel's ch. 7, 'Beowulf's Fights with Water-Monsters', is also of interest in this connection. His 1979 book consists of a set of nine chapters linking elements of *Beowulf* to corresponding elements in Irish tradition, together with an introductory chapter that reviews prior scholarship tracing Celtic influence on *Beowulf*.

[36] Many scholars have found a parallel to *Beowulf* in the Irish tale known as 'The Hand and the Child'; for discussion, see Theodore M. Andersson, 'Sources and Analogues', in *A Beowulf Handbook*, pp. 125–48 (at pp. 134–38). A thorough review of the question is offered by R. Mark Scowcroft, 'The Irish Analogues to *Beowulf*', *Speculum*, 74 (1999), 22–64.

[37] Miscellaneous parallels to elements of Old English poems drawn from early Celtic sources are given in translation in *Sources and Analogues of Old English Poetry*, vol. II: *The Major Germanic and Celtic Texts in Translation*, trans. by Daniel G. Calder and others (Cambridge, 1983). Charles D. Wright, *The Irish Tradition in Old English Literature* (Cambridge, 1993) is almost exclusively concerned with homilies and other examples of overtly religious literature, where he traces many instances of influence from Irish sources. While downplaying claims that have been made for Irish influence on *Beowulf*, he declines to engage with those arguments directly.

> Never again would he glitter and glide
> And show himself off in midnight air.[38]

In the 'song within the song' known as 'The Fight at Finnsburh', which harkens back to an earlier episode of the heroic age, the lurid quality that enlivens Heaney's translation at isolated moments threatens to overwhelm its customary decorum. The lines that describe the funeral pyre of Frisian and Danish warriors cut down at Finn's stronghold, in particular, force to the breaking point what is already a horrific moment in the original text:

> *Carcass flame*
> *swirled and fumed,*
> *they stood round the burial*
> *mound and howled*
> *as heads melted,*
> *crusted gashes*
> *spattered and ran*
> *bloody matter.*[39]

Here and elsewhere, Heaney's *Beowulf* has a sensational streak that leaves space for one's wilder imaginings concerning pagan Dark Age Europe. His translation thus plays variations upon the poem's own weird strength as the one work of Old English poetry in which demons and cannibalistic monsters freely roam over the land, while the heads of dead warriors literally melt during cremation ceremonies of the kind that elsewhere, in the literature of this time, are generally cloaked under a veil of silence.

A Sampler from the Dragon Episode

Enough has been said in the foregoing pages to suggest that Heaney's credentials for undertaking his translation of *Beowulf* are indeed massively adequate, while the apparent quirks of his diction serve coherent aims, as well. For a poet to be qualified to undertake a project, however, is not the same thing as completing it successfully. A review of a few specific passages that exemplify Heaney's

[38] Heaney's *Beowulf*, p. 191 (translating lines 2832–33a).

[39] Heaney's *Beowulf*, p. 77 (translating lines 1119–22a). Attentive readers will note a rare error in Heaney's rendering of verse 1120a (*hlynede for hlawe*) in the plural as 'they stood round the burial / mound and howled'. There is more overt grief in the translation than in the original poem at this point, for what the OE verse means is 'it [the bonfire, singular] resounded before the mound'.

techniques may therefore be justified. Each of the eight passages that I have singled out for brief comment below are drawn from the dragon episode, that part of the poem where he is generally felt to find his stride as translator.[40]

(1) After an unnamed fugitive has provoked the dragon's fury through his theft of a cup from an ancient barrow, Beowulf and a group of his thegns proceed to that site. The thief is the unwilling guide to whom allusion is made in the first two lines here, which correspond to lines 2409b–10 of the original poem:

> Against his will
> he led them to the earth-vault he alone knew,
> an underground barrow near the sea-billows
> and heaving waves, heaped inside
> with exquisite metalwork.[41]

Readers familiar with the text on which this passage is based will notice one infelicity here. In the original, the word *ānne* in the second line, inflected in the masculine accusative singular case, agrees grammatically with the accusative noun *eorðsele* in that same line, not with the nominative pronoun *hē*. Heaney thus errs when he says that the thief advanced 'to the earth-vault he alone knew' rather than 'to that point where he knew of a singular hall in the earth' (that is, a strange or remarkable hall).[42] This does look like a mistake rather than an act of poetic license, and if so, it slightly undermines his authority as a translator. At the same time, the mistake is a trivial one that hinges on a subtle grammatical distinction. From a poetic standpoint, nothing is lost and something could even be said to be gained from Heaney's wording. There is no error of fact here, for indeed only the

[40] At pp. xxii–xxiii of his introduction, Heaney discusses the process by which he first started on his translation, then left it off, then found his second wind. Shippey, '*Beowulf* for the Big-Voiced Scullions', has commented on this feature of the text: 'I formed the impression that he was becoming more comfortable with his mode as time went by' (p. 10). Howe too ('Scullionspeak', p. 35) finds that 'The most moving and powerful moments of his translation appear in the speeches delivered by characters during the last third of the poem'.

[41] Heaney's *Beowulf*, p. 163. The original text as printed in this bilingual edition reads as follows, minus the diacritics:

> He ofer willan giong,
> to ðæs ðe he eorð-sele anne wisse,
> hlæw under hrusan holm-wylme neh,
> yð-gewinne, se wæs innan full
> wrætta ond wira.

[42] Compare the *DOE*, s.v. *ān*, sense A.5: 'in intensifying uses, *an* emphasizes the uniqueness, impressiveness or remarkable quality of the referent'.

thief knows exactly where to go. The next three lines involve no such problems. The phrase *holm-wylme neh, / yðgewinne*, meaning literally 'near the surge of the sea, the clash of waves', becomes in Heaney's translation 'near the sea-billows and heaving waves'. The phrase *innan full / wrætta ond wira*, literally 'filled within with ornaments and gold filagree', becomes 'heaped inside with exquisite metalwork'. In places where the Old English poet uses four-square nouns and adjectives, Heaney opts for motion words, for verb-based forms like 'heaving' and 'heaped'. For the modern reader, the effect of this syntactic freedom is to dramatize the physical setting of the action while also highlighting the theme of buried treasure — two elements that are likely to arouse readers' sympathetic interest in this poem well before its thematic subtleties become apparent.

(2) A few lines later, as if his past life is running before his eyes in the hour or so before his supreme test, the aged Beowulf reminisces about how his grandfather King Hrethel fostered him when a child:

> While I was his ward, he treated me no worse
> as a wean about the place than one of his own boys,
> Herebeald and Haethcyn, or my own Hygelac.[43]

Heaney's use of demotic diction brings this passage down to earth and humanizes it. As an equivalent to the phrase *beorn in burgum* 'a man or warrior in the settlements', Heaney gives us 'as a wean about the place'. The Scots-Irish dialect word *wean*, meaning 'small child' ('wee one'), provides an unanticipated domestic touch: the great hero Beowulf was once, we discover, just as helpless and innocent as any mother's son. As an equivalent to the next Old English phrase, *þonne his bearna hwylc* 'than each of his sons', Heaney gives us 'than one of his own boys'. There is nothing inaccurate about this wording, and yet it suggests something less formal, more domestic than the original phrasing. King Hrethel, like the farmer-kings of Norwegian fairy tales,[44] now has 'boys' who can be visualized as playing about the courtyard.

(3) Heaney's translation of the elegiac passage known as 'the Father's Lament' (lines 2446b–62a) confirms the almost Sophoclean mood that infuses the whole

[43] Heaney's *Beowulf*, p. 165, translating lines 2432–34 of the original text:
'Næs ic him to life laðra owihte
beorn in burgum þonne his bearna hwylc,
Herebeald ond Hæðcyn, oððe Hygelac min.'

[44] *East o' the Sun and West o' the Moon: Fifty-Nine Norwegian Folk Tales from the Collection of Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe*, trans. by George Webbe Dasent (New York, 1970), a reprint edition based on Dasent's 1888 edition of tales collected by Asbjornsen and Møe earlier in the nineteenth century.

dragon episode, as he presents it. Here an anonymous old man is presented as a figure of suicidal grief after his son is hanged on the gallows:

> He begins to keen
> and weep for his boy [. . .].
> He gazes sorrowfully at his son's dwelling,
> the banquet hall bereft of all delight,
> the windswept hearthstone; the horsemen are sleeping,
> the warriors under ground; what was is no more.
> No tunes from the harp, no cheer raised in the yard.
> Alone with his longing, he lies down on his bed
> and sings a lament; everything seems too large,
> the steadings and the fields.

The landscape of Heaney's version of this imagined scene includes Irish 'steadings' rather than English 'villages' or more neutral 'settlements'. It echoes with the sound of Irish 'keening' rather than English 'lamentation'. A father's grief at the death of his son thereby leaps over a thousand years and, paradoxically, becomes timeless by being linked to the contemporary world. Hard-won simplicity is the rule in this passage, as is often true of Heaney's translation despite the extravagant diction sometimes employed. One has a sense of the presentness of death, of the inexpiable character of officially sanctioned killings, of huge emotions kept barely under control. The style here is reminiscent of Yeats at his best, and yet the modern English lines are directly expressive of the Old English text and are imitative of its style as well. As throughout Heaney's translation, every line is linked by alliteration in a manner reminiscent of the original verse form. The single apparent exception to this rule, the fourth line from the bottom ('No tunes from the harp, no cheer raised in the yard') can be seen to be no exception at all when one reads the word 'tunes' with an Irish intonation — that is, with an initial affricate [č] as in 'church'.

(4) Three verses that follow somewhat later (2522–23a) exemplify Heaney's approach to syntax and metre. As is well known, the syntax of Old English poetry departs emphatically from that of modern English poetry or prose. The soul of that difference is the habitual use of the device of *variation*, a technique whereby the same essential idea is expressed two, three, or even four times in words or phrases that are grammatically equivalent but that may be separated from one another by words having a different grammatical function.[45] A translation that

[45] For a clear account of the grammatical device of variation, see Fred C. Robinson, *Beowulf and the Appositive Style* (Knoxville, 1985), pp. 3–4. In the rest of that book, Robinson discusses the workings of this device both literally and metaphorically.

mirrors this syntax in modern English is likely to end up as ungrammatical chaos, for the current idiom of English is governed far more powerfully by the expectations of SVO (subject-verb-object) syntax. Heaney differs from most other translators in regard to his willingness to disregard the syntax of the original poem in favour of a different grammar whereby nouns may be converted into verbs, adjectives into prepositional phrases, and so forth. At the same time, he makes a scrupulous effort to preserve all elements of the sense of each clause or sentence. Metrically, his verse is suggestive of the four-beat, alliterative rhythm of *Beowulf* without being bound by strict rules that might become tyrannical if observed consistently. In the passage that follows, the hero is speaking just before his encounter with the dragon:

> 'But I shall be meeting molten venom
> in the fire he breathes' [. . .].[46]

In a brilliant conversion of the syntax of the original text, Heaney takes the OE noun *hātes* 'of heat', inflected in the genitive singular case, and turns it into the past participle 'molten' used adjectivally. He takes *oreðes* 'of breath', another noun in the genitive singular case, and converts it into the verbal phrase 'he breathes'. The sentence produced by this grammatical metamorphosis is thus both eminently speakable and semantically apt.

(5) Not long after this passage, a similar vocal and aural quality is in evidence when the king's untried kinsman, Wiglaf, speaks out as his lord stands enveloped in the dragon's flames:

> 'As God is my witness,
> I would rather my body were robed in the same
> burning blaze as my gold-giver's body
> than go back home bearing arms.'[47]

With its headlong enjambment in the two middle lines ('the same / burning blaze'), this passage is arguably more forceful in Heaney's version than in the

[46] Heaney's *Beowulf*, p. 171. In the original text (p. 170):
'ac ic ðær heaðu-fyres hates wene,
oreðes ond attres' [. . .].

[47] Heaney's *Beowulf*, p. 179, translating lines 2650b–54a:
'God wat on mec,
þæt me is micle leofre, þæt minne lic-haman
mid minne gold-gyfan gled fæðmie.
Ne þynceð me gerysne, þæt we rondas beren
eft to earde [. . .]'.

original text, with its more formal syntax. Enhancing the four-square declaration 'As God is my witness, / I would rather [. . .]' are aural harmonies built up of repeated *g-* alliterations ('God', 'gold-giver', 'go'), even more insistent *b-* alliterations ('body', 'burning', 'blaze', 'body', 'back', 'bearing'), and a threefold internal off-rhyme based on the long vowel *o* ('robed', 'gold', 'go').

(6) A few lines later, Heaney achieves another striking effect by once again abandoning the syntax of the original text in favour of a new grammatical construction:

> After those words, a wildness rose
> in the dragon again and drove it to attack [. . .].[48]

A literal paraphrase of the main part of the equivalent Old English text, *wyrm yrre cwom, / atol inwit-gæst*, would be 'the dragon advanced angrily, that terrible malicious foe'. Heaney introduces a periphrastic clause based on strong simple verbs: 'a wildness rose [. . .] and drove it to attack'). Also worth noting is how Heaney refers to the dragon. Nowhere does he translate OE *wyrm* as either 'worm' or 'wyrm', as many other translators do. His *wyrm* is a 'dragon' or 'fire-dragon' or 'serpent'; it is a 'hoard-guard', a 'hoard-watcher', a 'mound-keeper', a 'treasure-minder', a 'barrow-dweller'; it is a 'poison-breather', a 'vile sky-winger', ' this scourge of the people', 'an old dawn-scorching serpent'; it is even a 'monster', an 'outlandish thing' — but it is never a 'worm', a word that might well seem bathetic in this heroic setting. At times one almost suspects that Heaney identifies himself in some sense with the dragon, that ancient combatant. In his prose introduction, he writes of the dragon with a lyricism that he does not permit himself in the translation itself: 'Once he is wakened, there is something glorious in the way he manifests himself, a Fourth of July effulgence fireworking its path across the night sky [. . .]. He is at once a stratum of the earth and a streamer in the air, no painted dragon but a figure of real oneiric power.'[49] One is reminded of Heaney's account of his poetic calling in his poem 'North', with its draconian imagery introduced within a visionary framework, a moment of 'real oneiric power'. The fiery effulgence that flares from the dragon in the final third of Heaney's *Beowulf* almost seems to emanate from the author, or at least to blaze up with the author's approval.

[48] Heaney's *Beowulf*, p. 181, translating lines 2669–70:
Æfter ðam wordum wyrm yrre cwom,
atol inwit-gæst oðre siðe.

[49] Heaney's *Beowulf*, p. xix.

(7) Towards the end of the poem, the dying Beowulf, speaking to his kinsman Wiglaf, asks him to enter the barrow so as to bring some of its treasures to light. The King speaks of his wish to lay eyes on the jewels he has bought with his life:

> 'Away you go: I want to examine
> that ancient gold, gaze my fill
> on those garnered jewels [. . .].'[50]

A colloquial note is struck even in the King's dying moments: 'Away you go'. As for the wording 'garnered jewels' in the third of these lines, it may seem like a surprisingly free departure from the text that Heaney is translating, *swegle searo-gimmas*, for that OE phrase means no more than 'bright precious jewels'. Upon reflection, one may suspect that through use of the word 'garnered' Heaney is trying to capture some of the force of the preceding noun *gold-ǣht*, 'golden possessions', in the sense of inherited riches, while also playing a variation on the *g-* alliterations of 'go', 'gold', and 'gaze'. But there is an added value here that can easily be missed. In the context of ancient burial troves, the adjective 'garnered' naturally calls to mind the noun 'garnet'. It thereby provides a link to the magnificent treasure hoard that was unearthed in 1939 at Sutton Hoo, East Anglia, with its exquisitely wrought gold and garnet jewelry. Heaney is thus allowing himself an almost Poundian play on the sound as well as the sense of words. It is a deft touch, given the magnetic attraction that has drawn *Beowulf* and Sutton Hoo together in the scholarly literature as well as in the popular imagination.[51]

(8) In the last example to be cited here, Beowulf is speaking again. As his last request, he asks that his people build him a noble barrow by the sea, one that can be seen from afar,

> '[. . .] so that in coming times crews under sail
> will call it Beowulf's Barrow, as they steer
> ships across the wide and shrouded waters.'[52]

[50] Heaney's *Beowulf*, p. 185, translating lines 2747–49a:
'Bio nu on ofoste, þæt ic ær-welan,
gold-æht ongite, gearo sceawige
swegle searo-gimmas [. . .].'

[51] Roberta Frank, '*Beowulf* and Sutton Hoo: The Odd Couple', in *Voyage to the Other World: The Legacy of Sutton Hoo*, ed. by Calvin B. Kendall and Peter S. Wells (Minneapolis, 1992), pp. 47–64, has made the point that there are few good grounds for this conjunction, but her article will not stop it from being made. As Isaac Newton observed, two massive objects existing in proximity to one another will exert a mutual gravitational pull.

[52] Heaney's *Beowulf*, p. 189, translating lines 2806–08:
'[. . .] þæt hit sæ-liðend syððan hatan

Several features contribute to the success of these understated lines. The OE compound noun *sǣ-liðend* 'seafarers' is freely rendered, with slightly greater specificity, as 'crews under sail'. The adverb *feorran* 'from afar' is transmuted syntactically into the adjective 'wide' so as then to modify 'waters' that can be imagined to extend far into the distance. Still more arrestingly, the nominal phrase *flōda genipu*, literally 'the mists of the seas', is transfigured into the adjectival phrase 'shrouded waters'. We are given a moment to contemplate that last phrase in the imagined silence that follows, as the dying king takes off his necklace and helm and presents them to the young Wiglaf. Beowulf's soul is about to depart. His corpse will burn in the funeral pyre, and his people are to suffer the agonies of war. The great surge of waters will remain as ever, 'shrouded' in funerary mists in the expanses below the dead king's tomb.

Conclusion: Translation as Transformative Art

A little more than fifty years ago, the Scottish poet Edwin Morgan, writing in the introduction to his not wholly unsuccessful translation of *Beowulf*, made the point that as of that date, no distinguished verse translation of that poem had yet appeared in print. There was nothing, in his view, 'to interest either the practising poet or the cultivated reader of poetry, unless his aim is simply to find out what the poem deals with, and that would be more safely and easily got from a prose version'.[53] In part, Morgan attributed that sad state of affairs to the fact that no distinguished poet had tried his or her hand at translating this poem:

> *Beowulf* has been unfortunate in having had no Gavin Douglas, no George Chapman, no John Dryden; the only poet to turn his hand to it has been William Morris, and this translation is disastrously bad, being uncouth to the point of weirdness, unfairly inaccurate, and often more obscure than the original.

Complaints along such lines no longer need be voiced, though it is not Morgan's own translation that has filled the void to which he calls attention. Thanks to the publication of Heaney's *Beowulf*, the finest long poem that has come down to us in English from the period before the fourteenth century has been transfigured into something of interest to practising poets as well as to readers of poetry.

Biowulfes biorh, ða ðe brentingas
ofer floda genipu feorran drifað.'

[53] Edwin Morgan, *Beowulf: A Verse Translation into Modern English* (1952; reissued Manchester, 2002), p. xii.

While, if one wished, one could comb through Heaney's version to track down trivial inaccuracies or to call attention to notes sounded amiss,[54] his translation is accurate enough on a clause-by-clause basis to stand comparison with any other verse translation of *Beowulf* that has been made. More importantly, it lives. In terms of narrative energy, we have seen no translation from the corpus of Old English poetry as dynamic as this. We have seen few translations, if any, that are so complex in their verbal texture. Much as one may admire the bravado of Ezra Pound's 'Seafarer', that paraphrase is a special case and not one that would pass the test of accuracy.[55] More than with any other translation of *Beowulf* of which I am aware, with Heaney's version there is a counterpoint between the original work and the contemporary one, a quality of duet or duel that hovers about the work. This antiphonal quality (which is most accessible in the bilingual edition) encompasses both language and thought, lending additional nuances to each. As with the poems in Heaney's volume *North*, one has a sense that time is not something linear, progressing in a straightforward fashion from Beowulf 's violent world to our own more civilized era, but rather is something kaleidoscopically shifting, so that themes of the blood feud, or of parental grief, or of courage or generosity or betrayal are doubled upon themselves through one's consciousness that what existed then still exists now, despite all efforts to dissociate our civilized way of life from the elements of a more primitive past.

We should have known that if Heaney were going to translate *Beowulf*, he would do so in style.[56] By translating that poem into his heightened idiolect, Heaney has not only transformed it into a new work that can be read with pleasure by anyone interested in either Old English literature or contemporary poetry. He has also

[54] One inaccuracy that I have noticed (in addition to the two cited above) should perhaps be mentioned. In the episode of the dragon fight, Heaney gives the impression that the aged Beowulf is fighting inside the dragon's barrow: 'Down there in the barrow, Beowulf the warrior / lifted his shield' (thus translating *biorn under beorge* 'the warrior below the barrow', 2559a). In fact, of course, the King is standing beside the barrow, which towers above him. The fight takes place in the open ground, as indeed Heaney makes clear later on (at lines 2754–55 of his translation).

[55] Fred C. Robinson, '"The Might of the North": Pound's Anglo-Saxon Studies and "The Seafarer"', *Yale Review*, 71 (1982), 199–224, provides an engrossing account of the making of this influential paraphrase.

[56] Note in this connection a short passage from Heaney's poem 'The Real Names', in *Electric Light* (London, 2001), pp. 45–50. Heaney quotes an anecdote told by John Aubrey concerning the young Shakespeare, who is said for a while to have followed his father's trade as a butcher but who, 'when / He kill'd a Calfe, [. . .] would doe it in *high style* / & make a speech' (p. 46). Doing things in style, from this perspective, is a way of lending them more than a touch of the histrionic.

created a 'poet's poem' that has the potential to work subtle transformations in the practice of contemporary verse itself through its introduction of a quasi-vatic eloquence and, occasionally, a controlled sensationalism to a poetic idiom that, since the modernist revolt, has often prided itself on its purity and precision and on various other virtues as well, but not so often on those two qualities.[57]

Only time will tell if the transformative influence of Heaney's translation on contemporary poetry will be great or small, just as only time will tell what transformative effects this sustained effort to 'Lie down / in the word hoard' will have on Heaney's own verse as his career continues to evolve.[58] In the meantime, this translation can be admired not just as a version of *Beowulf*, but also as a transfiguration of that earlier poem. No mere shadow of the original text, Heaney's *Beowulf* brings out the vatic eloquence, the emotional depths, the ethical force, and the sensual magnetism of that Old English poem more persuasively than any other modern English translation has done. Is his poem true to the original text? To my mind, yes, with a very few quibbles; it is as faithful as any translation that has the slightest aspirations in the direction of poetry is likely to be. More importantly, perhaps, *is there truth in it*? Despite its surreal elements, is it true to human experience, and is it true to its own mode of being as a lavish fiction set in the

[57] Of course, no one should minimize the presence and importance of either the vatic mode or of sensationalism in English-language poetry of the past fifty years. A colleague, Lynn Keller, who has read this chapter in advance of publication has pointedly reminded me of 'all the confessional poets, the post-Beat Beats, the sexual explicitness of some contemporary feminist poets', and other tendencies to exploit the sensational in contemporary verse, and I am quick to grant the validity of this point. Still, a phrase like Heaney's 'swamp-thing from hell' seems to me an unusually gleeful exploitation of the genre of 'pulp fiction', while his skill at adopting the voice of vatic eloquence (as in 'The Father's Lament' or parts of Hrothgar's 'Sermon') stands in favourable contrast to the aspirations of most contemporary poets in this regard. It is the deployment of these two seemingly opposed strains in tandem, one lurid and one lofty, that seems to me a key element in the success of Heaney's translation, which resembles the original poem in that regard.

[58] Although the question of the continuing influence of Old English poetry on Heaney's own verse is not one that can be pursued here, it is worth noting that three poems in Heaney's collection *Electric Light* (2001) are important in this regard. These are 'The Border Campaign' (p. 18), which juxtaposes images of bombings in Ulster with Heaney's memory of his reading of *Beowulf* as a student; 'The Fragment' (p. 57), which provides one of the epigraphs to the present book and which makes its point through images relating to the scop's song in *Beowulf* and the fragmentary poem *The Battle of Maldon*; and part 3 of 'On His Work in the English Tongue' (p. 62), which evokes as an example of 'passive suffering' the grief of King Hrethel in the passage from *Beowulf* known as 'The Father's Lament'.

antique past? These are the questions most worth asking, not just for readers of this translation but, I suspect, for Heaney himself; for what Heaney seems most to have admired in *Beowulf* is not just its strong story or its ritualized language, but rather 'the truthfulness of [its] representation of the kind of creatures we are'.[59] One has the sense that in taking on this project, Heaney not only wished to serve the needs of students and their instructors in courses in English literature, but also to reconfirm his lifelong commitment to poetry itself 'as a necessary and redemptive mode of being human'.[60]

In many ways, as has been noticed before, 'The toughest critics of Heaney's *Beowulf* have been the Old English specialists'.[61] I suspect that in the years to come, once the initial response to the newness of Heaney's translation has worn off, the questions that I have posed about its 'truth value' will inspire little controversy. Large numbers of persons who have read it (or who have listened to Heaney read it aloud, whether in person or via the BBC or through an audio recording) have done so with pleasure and with few serious doubts concerning the value of this achievement by our finest poet-scholar working in the prime of his career. Now that the dust has settled six years after the publication of Heaney's *Beowulf*, it is perhaps time that a clear and reasoned statement should be given of its merits.

[59] Seamus Heaney, interviewed on 'The McNeil/Lerer Newshour' of 28 March 2000; the interviewer is Elizabeth Farnsworth. A videotape of this interview has been published by Films for the Humanities (FFH 10924), and a transcription (not wholly accurate) is available via 'Online NewsHour: 'The New *Beowulf*', 28 March 2000 <http://www.pbs.org/newshour>.

[60] Seamus Heaney, 'The Impact of Translation', *Yale Review*, 76 (1986), 1–14 (p. 3).

[61] McGowan, 'Heaney, Cædmon, *Beowulf*', p. 39.

Afterword

On Night Owls and Society

The more I have read of the earliest English poetry, the more clearly I have come to perceive that its words are not really recorded in ink, despite all testimony to the contrary. They are written in a curious liquid made of visible darkness. This fluid never dries. Like Homer's winged words, the words of this literature are therefore always poised to break into flight, like so many night owls or rebellious angels, and they are likely to do so whenever a reader draws near.

This is true first of all because the words spelled out by the archaic letters of Old English insular script were once breath uttered by living persons. At any time they can be resolved again into their native element of moist air, at which point they slip out of sight.

Apart from that phenomenon, the words of Old English texts are fickle, as anyone who has looked into their chequered history will know. They have not stayed put, nor will they do so in future. Generation after generation, they have been willing to try on new fashions and experiment with new relationships, depending on how they have been received by persons of discernment. And this is not only true of the extravagant poetic language that was called into being by the sonorities inherent in the alliterative verse form. It is also true of the words of poets who wrote in prose, and who thought that what they said was as firm as the ground on which they stood.

Looking back on this book, I can see that it is about translations, transmutations, appropriations. It is about myths and mystifications: an old stone wall that will not stay put, a new house that is discovered to have ancient foundations and an unplanned staircase. It tells of readers who leave the room to take a walk, and who when they return are different persons. It deals with handwritten texts that, in a manner like that of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, lay undisturbed for centuries and then woke up to be rejuvenated by printers' type and, now, by the

synapses of the World Wide Web. Most of all it is about the unceasing interplay of art and society, in a world where each requires the other if it is to have more than a stunted existence. It is a book that makes one wonder why, when society is renewing itself, it needs things that are archaic, and why this has always been so.

Index of Modern Scholars Cited

Editors of standard modern editions are not included in the index except when reference has been made to their expressed views or their special handling of the text. Similarly, editors of critical anthologies in which items of interest have appeared are only included if attention is being directed to the anthology as a whole rather than to an essay published in it.

Aarne, Antti 311 n. 10
Abels, Richard P. 225 n. 52
Abrahams, Roger 291 n. 23
Abu-Lughod, Lila 255 n. 5
Adams, Marilyn McCord 298 n. 40
Almqvist, Bo 312, 316, 318
Andersen, Hans Erik 263 n. 20
Anderson, Benedict 100 n. 73
Anderson, Earl R. 205 n. 6, 213 n. 26, 222 n. 45, 224 n. 48, 231 n. 60, 239–40, 262 n. 17
Anderson, George K. 76 n. 7, 231 n. 61
Andersson, Theodore M. 34, 35, 180 n. 93, 214 n. 28, 235 n. 66, 310 n. 5, 342 n. 36
Atherton, Mark 312 n. 14

Bakhtin, Mikhail 14
Banerjee, Jacqueline 192 n. 8
Barish, Jonas 294 n. 32
Barlow, Frank 168 n. 68
Barron, W. R. J. 301 n. 46
Barthes, Roland 203 n. 1
Bartlett, Robert 283 nn. 6–7
Bassett, Steven 94 n. 58
Bately, Janet M. 140 n. 30, 207 n. 13, 261 n. 15
Bauman, Richard 81
Bazelmans, Jos 124 n. 10
Benjamin, Walter 152 n. 31
Bennett, W. Lance 285 n. 9
Berg, J. H. van den 256 n. 6
Bergler, Edmund 258
Bibire, Paul 125 n. 11
Biebuyck, Daniel 52
Biggs, Frederick M. 189 n. 1
Blake, N. F. 208 n. 15, 219 n. 38
Bliss, A. J. 32 n. 48, 126–7 n. 16, 202
Bloch, R. Howard 254 n. 2
Boas, Franz 286
Bogoch, Bryna 182 n. 96
Bolton, W. F. 145 n. 10
Bond, George 38 n. 65
Booth, Paul Anthony 162 n. 52

Boym, Svetlana 176–7
Bradley, S. A. J. 207 n. 11
Brady, Caroline A. 88 n. 41, 91 n. 47
Braid, Donald 22 n. 21
Brandl, Alois 38 n. 65
Brault, Gerard J. 264 n. 23
Bredehoft, Thomas A. 10 n. 11
Bremmer, Rolf H., Jr 247 n. 5
Brewer, Derek 280 n. 2
Brooke, Stopford 269
Brooks, Nicholas 206
Brown, George Hardin 145 n. 10, 161 n. 48, 324 n. 35
Brown, Mary Ellen 186 n. 107
Brown, Michelle P. 183 n. 100
Bruce, Alexander M. 32 n. 47, 125 n. 12, 126 n. 13
Bruce-Mitford, Rupert 18 n. 11, 181 n. 95
Brunvand, Jan Harold 288 n. 16, 323 n. 32
Budny, Mildred 218 n. 37
Bullough, D. A. 25 n. 32, 162 n. 52
Bulst, Walther 145 n. 10
Burger, Peter L. 255 n. 5
Burgess, Glyn S. 301 n. 46
Burrow, J. A. 264 n. 23
Busse, Wilhelm G. 30 n. 45, 152 n. 28, 206 n. 6, 222 n. 45, 228 n. 55
Byock, Jesse L. 34, 235 n. 66

Caie, Graham 78 n. 14
Cain, Christopher 30 n. 45, 34 n. 55, 71, 114, 147 n. 16, 162 n. 51, 172, 175 n. 83
Calder, Daniel G. 33 n. 48, 342 n. 37
Campbell, A. 163 n. 55
Campbell, James 26 n. 34
Cantor, Norman F. 254 n. 2
Carson, Ciaran 336 n. 20
Carver, M. O. H. 18 n. 11
Cavill, Paul 155 n. 33, 315 n. 17
Chadwick, H. Munro 282 n. 4
Chambers, R. W. 19 n. 15, 34 n. 54, 35 n. 57, 40, 75 n. 4, 76, 88, 89 n. 43, 91 n. 45, n. 47, 92, 93 n. 55, 94, 111, 134 n. 25, 135 n. 27
Chappell, L. W. 311 n. 8
Chase, Colin 30 n. 45
Chase, Richard 291 n. 23
Chaytor, H. J. 153 n. 31
Cherniss, Michael D. 22 n. 22, 30 n. 44
Chickering, Howell D., Jr 145 n. 10, 329–30 n. 11
Christensen, Tom 140 n. 31
Christiansen, Reidar Th. 311 n. 9
Cicala, John 95 n. 62
Clanchy, Michael T. 182 n. 96
Clark, Cecily 205 n. 6
Clark, George 28 n. 38, 208, 210 n. 18, 225, 230 n. 60, 263 n. 21
Clemoes, Peter 262 n. 19
Clifford, James 80
Cohn, Dorrit 296 n. 36
Colgrave, Bertram 145 n. 10
Connor, Patrick W. 159 n. 43
Cook, Robert 35 n. 56
Cooper, Janet 260 n. 12
Creed, Robert P. 76 n. 10, 149 n. 20
Crépin, André 144
Cross, J. E. 204–5 n. 4, 215 n. 30
Crossley-Holland, Kevin 190, 328–9 n. 9
Cubitt, Catherine 151 n. 26
Culler, Jonathan 53 n. 98

Dames, Nicholas 179 n. 91
D'Andrade, Roy 254 n. 3
Danet, Brenda 182 n. 96
David, Alfred 327–8, 341 n. 33

Davis, Craig R. 32 n. 47, 60–1, 78 n. 13, 98 n. 65, 204 n. 3
Davis, R. H. C. 24 n. 30
Dexter, Kathleen M. 169 n. 69, 170 n. 71
Dillon, Myles 301 n. 46
Discenza, Nicole Guenther 41 n. 73
Doane, A. N. 7 n. 5, 147 n. 15, 160 n. 44, 208 n. 16, 209 n. 17
Dobbie, E. V. K. 85 n. 33, 91 n. 46, 99 n. 69, 145 n. 10, 169 n. 69, 310 n. 5
Donahue, Charles J. 22–3 n. 22
Donoghue, Daniel 331 n. 13
Douglas, Mary 255 n. 5, 256–7 n. 7
Driscoll, Stephen 101, 106 n. 84
DuBois, Thomas A. 51 n. 95
Du Bois, W. E. B. 294
Dumville, David N. 23 n. 24, 94 n. 58, 216
Dundes, Alan 209 n. 18, 280 n. 1
Dunning, T. P. 32–3 n. 48

Eagleton, Terry 338–9 n. 27
Eco, Umberto 58
Ekwall, Eilert 94 n. 58
Eldevik, Randi 326 n. 3
Elliott, R. W. V. 204 n. 4
Erickson, John 189 n. 1
Evans, Jonathan D. M. 34 n. 55

Farrell, Robert T. 39 n. 67
Farrer, Claire R. 209 n. 18
Finke, Laurie A. 9 n. 9
Finnegan, Ruth 19 n. 16, 254 n. 4
Fischer, Michael M. J. 58 n. 106, 81 n. 23
Fish, Stanley 297 n. 37
Fisher, D. J. V. 151 n. 26
Fjalldal, Magnús 35 n. 56
Flower, Robin 159 n. 43
Foley, John Miles 81 n. 26, 146 n. 14
Foley, William A. 293
Foot, Sarah 26 n. 34
Foucault, Michel 13, 78, 106, 203 n. 1
Frame, Douglas 177 n. 89
Frank, Roberta 33 n. 50, 34, 54 n. 100, 62 n. 12, 66, 75 n. 5, 76 n. 9, 77 n. 11, 92, 141, 142 n. 3, 145, 146 n. 13, 147, 148, 149, 154 n. 32, 196, 199, 228–9 n. 57, 230 n. 60, 349 n. 51
Frantzen, Allen J. 5 n. 3, 17 n. 8, 19, 81 n. 23, 82 n. 29, 109, 123 n. 9, 154 n. 32, 254 n. 2
Frese, Dolores Warwick 225
Fry, Donald K. 28 n. 40, 77 n. 10, 101, 154 n. 32, 156 n. 36, 171 n. 74
Frye, Northrup 29 n. 42
Fulk, R. D. 30 n. 45, 34 n. 55, 48 n. 88, 71, 114, 147 n. 16, 162 n. 51, 172, 173 n. 82, 175 n. 83

Garmonsway, G. N. 34 n. 54, 35 n. 57, 42 n. 78, 88 n. 41, 133 n. 23
Geary, Patrick J. 59 n. 1
Gerritsen, Johan 15 n. 5
Gillett, Andrew 59 n. 1
Girard, René 210 n. 19, 244–5 n. 2
Girouard, Mark 229
Glassie, Henry 316 n. 21
Glazier, Stephen D. 293 n. 29
Glob, P. V. 335 n. 17
Gneuss, Helmut 26, 160 n. 44, 161 n. 45, 221 n. 43, 263 n. 21
Godden, Malcolm R. 25 n. 32, 111–13, 184 n. 101, 213 n. 25, 221, 223 n. 46, 263 n. 21
Goffart, Walter 114–18
Goh, Gwang-Yoon 190 n. 5
Goody, Jack 23, 54 n. 99, 286
Gordon, Peter 288 n. 16
Gordon, R. K. 172

Gransden, Antonia 159 n. 39, 163
Gregory, J. C. 272
Green, D. H. 20 n. 16, 146 n. 14, 292 n. 25
Greenblatt, Stephen 82 n. 27
Greenfield, Stanley B. 33 n. 48, 82 n. 17
Gretsch, Mechthild 151 n. 26
Griffin, Jasper 264
Gruber, Loren C. 341 n. 32
Gummere, Francis B. 192 n. 9
Gunn, Giles 82
Gurevich, Aaron 182 n. 98, 253 n. 1, 271

Haarder, Andreas 67–8, 117 n. 16
Habicht, Werner 278
Hamel, Anton Gerard van 36 n. 59
Hamer, Richard 192 n. 9
Hamilton, Sarah 251 n. 13
Harker, Dave 186 n. 108
Harris, Joseph 55 n. 101, 189 n. 1, 190
Harris, Stephen J. 61, 237–9
Hart, Henry 336 n. 18
Harvilahti, Lauri 195–6
Hass, Robert 328 n.8
Haug, Walter 292 n. 25
Heaney, Seamus 328, 353 nn. 59–60
Heather, Peter 88 n. 41
Henige, David P. 91 n. 45
Hermann, John P. 14
Higham, N. J. 17 n. 6, n. 9
Hill, David 85 n. 36, 122 n. 7
Hill, John M. 61–2, 73 n., 149 n. 20, 212 n. 24, 230 n. 60, 235 n. 66, 251 n. 14
Hill, Joyce 33 n. 48, 77–8 n. 13, 78, 79 n. 17, 93, 151 n. 26
Hillman, Richard 208 n. 16, 227 n. 54, 231 n. 60
Hills, Catherine 17 n. 6
Hinchman, Lewis P. and Sandra K. 296 n. 35
Hines, John 17 n. 6, 59 n. 1, 107
Hinton, David A. 18 n. 12
Hobsbawn, Eric 18
Hodder, Ian 81, 182 n. 98, 254 n. 4
Hodges, Richard 16
Hodgkin, Robert H. 37 n. 62
Holland, Norman N. 270 n. 37
Holtei, R. 30 n. 45, 206 n. 6, 222 n. 45, 228 n. 55
Honegger, Th., 36 n. 59
Honko, Lauri 28 n. 39
Hope-Taylor, Brian 18 n. 12
Horsman, Reginald 17 n. 8
Horton, Robin 254 n. 4
Hough, Carole 239–41
Howe, Nicholas 17, 30 n. 45, 36 n. 58, 40 n. 70, 76 n. 6, 78 n. 14, 94 n. 58, 119 n. 1, 150, 328, 331 n. 13, 336 n. 21, 338 n. 24, 344 n. 40
Hubert, Henri 244–5, 247–9
Hunter, Michael 23 n. 24, 104 n. 80
Huppé, Bernard F. 7 n. 6
Hutsell, Melanie K. 141 n. 2
Huysche, Wentworth 118
Hyams, Paul R. 283 n. 6

Ingram, James 117
Insley, John 239–41
Ireland, Colin 309 n., 311 n. 8, 312 n. 14, 322 n. 29
Irvine, Martin 20 n. 16, 28–9 n. 40
Irving, Edward B., Jr 50, 180 n. 93, 213 n. 26, 228, 262 n. 17, 286
Isaac, G. D. 155 n. 33
Iser, Wolfgang 254 n. 3, 297 n. 37

Jacobs, Nicolas 30 n. 45
Jaeger, C. Stephen 211
Jakobson, Roman 51
Jameson, Fredric 55–6

Jauss, Hans Robert 254 n. 3, 297 n. 37
John, Eric 207 n. 13, 212, 236
Johnson, Judith 222 n. 45
Johnson, Mark 268 n. 31
Jørgensen, Bent 140 n. 30
Jørgensen, Lars 140 n. 31

Kaske, R. E. 128 n. 20
Kelly, Susan 160 n. 44
Kennedy, Alan 217 nn. 34–5
Kennedy, Charles W. 230 n. 60
Ker, N. R. 27 n. 37, 161 n. 45, 187 n. 109
Ker, W. P. 203–4 n. 2
Kermode, Frank 329 n. 10
Keynes, Simon 17 n. 8, 25 n. 31, 26 n. 36, 37 n. 61, 159 n. 39, 160 n. 44, 162 nn. 49–50, 205, 207 nn. 12–13, 214 n. 27, 215 n. 30, 222 n. 46
Kiernan, Kevin S. 15 n. 5, 30 n. 45, 155 n. 33
Kim, Hyeree 190 n. 5, 191 n. 7
Klaeber, Fr. 34 n. 54, 48 n. 88, 124 n. 10, 126 n. 16, 127
Kleinschmidt, Harald 59–60
Kliger, Samuel 116, 117 n. 17
Klinck, Anne L. 171 n. 76, 172 n. 79, 173 nn. 81–2, 189 n. 1, 190
Kornexl, Lucia 151 n. 26
Krapp, George P. 91 n. 46, 99 n. 69, 169 n. 69
Kratz, Dennis M. 163 n. 53
Kuhn, Sherman M. 341 n. 34
Kuhn, Thomas 295
Kulikowski, Michael 115 n. 12

Lakoff, George 268 n. 31
Landau, Misia 295 n. 35
Langenfelt, Gösta 33 n. 48, 77–8 n. 13, 93 n. 53
Lapidge, Michael 15 n. 5, 23 n. 24, 25 n. 31, 30 n. 45, 42 n. 75, 160–1 n. 45, 161 n. 46, 168 n. 68, 185 n. 105, 216 n. 33
Leake, Jane Acomb 40, 42–3 n. 79, 43, 61, 65
Le Goff, Jacques 259 n. 11
Leicester, H. Marshall, Jr 207 n. 10
Leinbaugh, Theodore 159 n. 40
Lendinara, Patrizia 148
Lerer, Seth 23–4, 149–50 n. 23, 154 n. 32
Lester, G. A. 310 n. 4
Lévi-Strauss, Claude 286
Lévy-Bruhl, Lucien 286
Lewis, Charlton M. 192–3
Lewis, C. S. 79–80, 84
Liberman, Anatoly 259
Lightfoot, William E. 291 n. 23
Liuzza, Roy Michael 30 n. 45, 152 n. 27, 187 n. 110, 328–9
Lloyd, L. J. 168 n. 68
Locherbie-Cameron, Margaret A. L. 208 n. 15
Lord, Albert B. 21, 51–2, 55 n. 101 146–7, 149, 154 n. 32, 156, 195, 310 n. 6
Lowe, Kathryn A. 160 n. 44
Lowenthal, David 107 n. 86, 253 n. 1
Luckmann, Thomas 255 n. 5
Lucy, Sam 17 n. 6
Lund, Niels 46 n. 84, 140 n. 31
Lüthi, Max 238, 286 n. 12
Lutz, Angelica 166 n. 65
Lutz, Catherine A. 254 n. 3, 255 n. 5
Lysaght, Patricia 309 n.

Mac Cárthaigh, Criostáir 318 n. 22
Mac Lean, Douglas 18 n. 12
Macrae-Gibson, O. D. 234 n. 64

Magennis, Hugh 160 n. 44, 184 n. 101, 222–3 n. 46, 257 n. 8, 258, 262 n. 18, 263, 270, 271 n. 42, 305 n. 52
Magoun, Francis P., Jr 28 n. 40, 42 nn. 77–8, 133 n. 22, 154 n. 32, 156
Malinowski, Bronislaw 51
Malone, Kemp 42 n. 77, 43 n. 79, 44 n. 81, 75 n. 4, 76, 91 n. 45, n. 47, 92 n. 48, 93, 94 n. 57, n. 59, 113 n. 7, 136 n. 28, 137 n. 29, 172 n. 79, 173 n. 81
Mandel, Jerome 226 n. 53
Marcus, George 58 n. 106, 80, 81 n. 23, 84
Margolin, Malcolm 256 n. 7
Matto, Michael 241
Mauss, Marcel 244–5, 247–9
McCarthy, Conor 340
McGowan, Joseph 331 n. 13, 333 n. 15, 353 n. 61
McGurk, P. 121 n. 6
McKinnell, John 205 n. 6
McLuhan, Marshall 153 n. 31
McNamara, John 321
McNamee, Maurice B. 33 n. 51
McNeill, William H. 80, 84, 100, 295 n. 33
Meaney, Audrey L. 30 n. 45, 32 n. 47, 94 n. 58
Mechling, Jay 57
Merrills, Andrew 114–15 n. 11
Meyvaert, P. 324 n. 34
Miller, Sean 159 n. 39
Miller, William Ian 235 n. 66
Mitchell, Bruce 190, 229
Mitfull, Inge B. 325 n
Molinari, Maria Vittoria 189 n. 1, 191 n. 7
Morgan, Edwin 350
Morreall, John 269
Muir, Bernard J. 169 n. 69
Murray, Alexander Callander 32 n. 47, 38 n. 64, 98
Mynors, R. A. B. 145 n. 10

Nagler, Michael N. 264 n. 25
Nagy, Joseph Falaky 141 n
Neat, Timothy 21–2 n. 21
Nelson, Janet L. 112 n. 4
Neuman de Vegvar, Carol 18 n. 11
Newton, Sam 30 n. 45, 32 n. 47, 37 n. 63
Nichols, Stephen J. 254 n. 2
Niles, John D. 1 n. 1, 5 nn. 3–4, 13 n. 1, 17 n. 8, 21 n. 19, 28 n. 38, 31 n. 46, 50 n. 91, n. 93, 63 n. 14, 83 n. 31, 105 n. 82, 109 n. 88, 157 n. 37, 183 n. 99, 199–201, 237 n. 1, 265 n. 26, 268 n. 30, 327 n. 4
Norman, F. 173 n. 81
North, Richard 112–13 n. 5

O'Brien, Elizabeth 312 n. 14
O'Brien O'Keeffe, Katherine 53 n. 98, 100 n. 71, 154 n. 32, 231 n. 60
O'Donnell, Daniel Paul 309 n., 310, 313, 319–20
O'Donoghue, Bernard 337 n. 22
O'Sullivan, Sean (= Seán Ó Súilleabháin) 311 n. 9, n. 11
Okpewho, Isidore 287 n. 13
Olrik, Axel 238, 286
Ong, Walter J. 153 n. 31, 286
Opland, Jeff 19 n. 15, 24 n. 28, 105 n. 82, 142 n. 3, 148 n. 20, 156 n. 34, 167 n. 66
Orchard, Andy 28 n. 38, 30 n. 45, 34 n. 54, 42 n. 75, n. 78, 43 n. 80, 146 n. 14, 157 n. 38
Oring, Elliott 289 n. 19
Osborn, Marijane 47 n. 87, 65, 85 n. 32, 272 n. 46, 310 n. 6
Overing, Gillian R. 47 n. 87

Page, R. I. 262 n. 16, 266 n. 27, 271 n. 41
Panzer, F. 35 n. 57
Parker, Michael 335 n. 16
Parkes, M. B. 60
Parks, Ward 14 n. 4, 181–2, 183 n. 99
Parry, Milman 21, 146–7, 195
Parsons, David 151 n. 26
Pegge, Samuel 142 n. 4
Pentikäinen, Juha 156–7 n. 37
Pettazzone, Raphael 291 n. 22
Pohl, Walter 41 n. 74, 59 n. 1
Pope, John C. 172 n. 79, 173 n. 82
Pound, Louise 29 n. 41, 310 n. 6
Puhvel, Martin 342 n. 35

Reichl, Karl 51 n. 95, 105 n. 82
Renfrew, Colin 254 n. 4
Renoir, Alain 146 n. 14
Renwick, Roger de V. 268 n. 31
Reynolds, R. L. 33 n. 48, 96
Reynolds, Susan 39 n. 66
Ricoeur, Paul 83, 106, 108 n. 87
Rieuwerts, Sigrid 141 n. 2
Rightmire, George Washington 283 n. 6, 284 n. 8
Rissanen, Matti 73 n. 2
Robertson, D. W., Jr 201, 256
Robinson, Fred C. 85 n. 33, 113–14, 175 n. 85, 187 n. 110, 201, 205–6 n. 6, 206 n. 9, 229, 230 n. 60, 232 n. 62, 247 n. 5, 270, 346 n. 45, 351 n. 55
Rollason, D. A. 283 n. 6
Rosenberg, Bruce A. 210 n. 18, 211 n. 20, 218 n. 36, 226 n. 53
Ross, Miceal 300 n. 44
Rumble, Alexander R. 85 n. 36
Ruthven, K. K. 292 n. 24

Sahlin, Marshall 99 n. 70
Said, Edward 58
Sapir, Edward 52
Sauer, Hans 325 n., 329 n. 10
Scattergood, John 205 n. 4, 206 n. 6
Schibsbye, Knud 189 n. 1
Schichtman, Martin B. 9 n. 9
Schrager, Sam 285 n. 9
Schücking, Levin L. 33 n. 51
Scowcroft, R. Mark 323, 342 n. 36
Scragg, Donald G. 164 n. 56, 208 n. 16, 209 n. 17, 215 n. 31, 219 n. 39, 222 n. 44, 228 n. 56
Sedgefield, Walter John 203 n. 2
Sharp, Cecil 52, 186
Shepherd, Geoffrey 315 n. 16
Shippey, T. A. 67–8, 117 n. 16, 185 n. 103, 190 n. 3, 338 n. 24, 344 n. 40
Simmons, Clare A. 17 n. 8
Simons, John 254 n. 2
Simpson, Jacqueline 34 n. 54, 35 n. 57, 42 n. 77, 88 n. 41, 133 n. 23
Simpson, Luisella 143 n. 6
Sims-Williams, Patrick 17 n. 6
Sisam, Kenneth 23 n. 24
Smith, A. H. 145 n. 10
Smithers, G. V. 42–3 n. 79, 230 n. 60
Smyth, Alfred P. 25 n. 31, 144 n. 7
Speirs, John 80
Spitzer, Leo 14
Stafford, Pauline 205 n. 5
Stallworthy, Jon 335 n. 18
Stanley, E. G. 36 n. 59, 77 n. 11, 199–200, 202, 256 n. 6, 315 n. 16
Starcke, Viggo 69–70 n. 5
Staudenmaier, John M. 296 n. 35
Stenton, F. M. 26 n. 33, 37 n. 61, 85 n. 36, 161 n. 47, 230 n. 60
Stern, Stephen 95 n. 62
Stitt, J. Michael 35 n. 57
Stock, Brian 20, 53 n. 98, 150 n. 24, 268 n. 32

Street, Brian V. 153 n. 31
Stuart, Heather 220 n. 40, 230–1 n. 60, 274 n. 48
Stuhmiller, Jacqueline 127 n. 16, 128 n. 19
Súilleabháin, Seán Ó, *see* O'Sullivan, Sean
Sutton-Smith, Brian 287 n. 15, 299 n. 43
Swan, Mary 4 n. 2
Sydow, C. W. von 20–1 n. 19, 156 n. 37

Tarski, A. 288 n. 17
Taylor, Archer 271 n. 40
Taylor, Henry Osborn 254 n. 4
Ten Brink, Bernhard 205 n. 6
Thomas, Keith 274
Thompson, Stith 311 n. 10, 315 n. 18
Thorkelin, Grímur Jónsson 117
Thormann, Janet 164 nn. 56–7
Thorpe, Benjamin 75 n. 4
Todorov, Tzvetan 77 n. 12
Toelken, Barre 268 n. 31
Tolkien, J. R. R. 33 n. 49, 36 n. 59, 127 n. 16, 292 n. 24
Townend, Matthew 44 n. 81, 140 n. 30, 166–7 n. 65
Trask, R. L. 293
Treharne, Elaine M. 4 n. 2
Tucker, Susie 269
Tupper, Frederick, Jr 171 n. 75
Turville-Petre, J. E. 36 n. 59

Uther, Hans-Jörg 311 n. 10

Vaihinger, Hans 298
VanderBilt, Deborah 157 n. 38
Van Houts, Elisabeth 165 n. 61
Vendler, Helen 335 n. 18
Vickrey, John F. 129 n. 20
Vincent, C. J. 311 n. 8

Wadstein, Elis 42 n. 79
Webster, Leslie 18 n. 11
Wenham, S. J. 85 n. 34
Wesling, Donald 152
Whitbread, L. G. 42 n. 75, 159 n. 39
White, Donald A. 16 n. 6
Whitelock, Dorothy 33 n. 49, 37 n. 63, 85 n. 35, 184 n. 101, 235 n. 67
Wieland, Gernot 30 n. 44, 277–8, 315 n. 16
Wilcox, Jonathan 223 n. 46, 253 n., 258, 262 n. 17
Williams, Bernard 288 n. 17
Williams, David 128–9 n. 20
Williams, Raymond 77 n. 12, 259 n. 11
Williamson, Linda 22 n. 21
Winterbottom, Michael 161 n. 46
Winterson, Jeanette 287 n. 13
Wolf, Alois 28 n. 39
Wolfram, Hervig 88–9 n. 41
Wood, Ian 66
Woolf, Rosemary 230 n. 60
Wormald, Patrick (= C. P. Wormald) 24, 26 n. 34, 49 n. 90, 101 n. 76, 102 n. 77, 160 n. 44, 181–2 n. 96, 281–2 n. 3
Wright, Charles D. 342 n. 37

Yorke, Barbara 17 n. 6
Young, Jean 258

Zaleski, Carol 323 n. 31
Zimmerman, Georges D. 303 n. 50, 311–12, 316 n. 20, 318

General Index

Ælfric 100 n. 72, 101–2, 159, 167, 262; alliterative style 102–3; hostility to *fabulae* 292; legend of Seven Sleepers 305 n. 52

Æthelweard's *Chronicon* 160–6; afterlife and influence 163 n. 55; dedicated to Matilda 165–6; European ambitions 163–4; oral sources (possible) 166, 166–7 n. 65; patriotic interests 164–5; pretentious style 161, 166

Alfred the Great 23–4, 142–3, 161–2; cult of 164–5; educational reforms 25, 33–4, 48, 162; Gothic descent 112, 125; marriage to Mercian princess 38, 68; 'myth of' 142–3, 143–4 n. 7; programme of translations 25, 162

Anglo-Latin literature, 4; Æthelweard 158–67, 306; Alcuin 19, 33, 167 n. 66; Aldhelm 142; Asser 25, 112–13, 125, 143 n. 7, 306; Byrhtferth of Ramsey 216, 324; *Historia de sancto Cuthberto* 143 n. 6; Leofric 168–9, 175–6; *Liber Eliensis* 217–18, 220; *Life of St. Oswald* 216–17, 222, 226, 231; *Ramsey Chronicle* 217. *See also* Æthelweard's *Chronicon*; Anglo-Norman literature; Bede; Latin literature.

Anglo-Norman literature 4–5; Henry of Huntingdon 217; John of Worcester 217, 224 n. 48, 240–1; Symeon of Durham 217; William of Malmesbury 141–3, 170, 186, 187, 306

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle 17–18, 24–5, 59–60, 143, 158, 163, 207, 217, 222–3, 231, 261 n. 15, 306; paratactic style 215; poems embedded in 100 n. 72, 164; individual annals: AD 449: 95; AD 514 and 534: 112 n. 4; AD 855: 23, 165–6; AD 901: 165; AD 991: 214, 216; AD 991–94: 216–17; AD 992–1011: 222–3; AD 993: 224 n. 48

Anglo-Saxon England 15–19, 158, 184 n. 101, etc.; Christian conversion of 22–3, 29, 312; Christian impact on 259; Danish wars 130, 185, 204, 212, 214, 222–3, 224, 250–1, 273; and ethnic synthesis 49; Germanic heritage 16–19, 27–8; Irish influence on 312; legal system 281–4; role of poetry in 18–19; Romano-British origins 16–18; and state-formation

26, 78; 'tenth-century Renaissance' 26, 78, 130–1, 151–2; textual culture 15–16, 23–4; Viking influences on 26, 31, 32, 33; violent tenor of life 85. *See also Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*; Archaeology; Kings (Anglo-Saxon); Laws (Anglo-Saxon); Myth of migration; Saints (Anglo-Saxon).
Archaeology 85, 95 n. 60, 140 n. 31, 181, 312 n. 14; post-Roman 16–17; individual sites: Lejre 47 n. 86, 140; Offa's Dyke 95; Sutton Hoo 18, 181, 349; Taplow 18, 181; Tissø 140 n. 31; Yeavering 18

Bard, modern quest for 141, 152, 186; Robert Burns 186; James MacPherson 141, 195; Thomas Percy 141, 142 n. 4, 195; Sir Walter Scott 196–7. *See also* Oral poet.
Battle of Maldon 184–5, 203–52, 260–3, 266–78, 306; attitude towards Æthelred 206–7; anti-heroic (disputed) 220 n. 40, 274; Christian in character 237–9, 246–7, 249, 251–2; code of suicidal devotion in 228–33, 236; code of vengeance in 233; comparative perspective on 215–19, 220, 231, 240–1; date 205–6; debate about tribute 204, 212–15, 219–20, 227; Ely tapestry 218–19; flight of cowardly retainers 222–4, 225; a fragment 219, 231, 261 n. 15; as historical battle 212; ideological content 204, 227–8; ironic elements 213, 206–7, 262 n. 17, 270, 272, 273; men named in the poem 225, 232–3; myth-like nature 204, 224 n. 48, 228, 241; personal name *Odda/Oddr* 223–4, 239–41; as propaganda piece (disputed) 241–2; psychological dimension 245–6, 248–9, 251–2; ritual-like 243–52; social hierarchy in 208; stand of loyal retainers 224–6, 273–4; stylistic simplicity 203, 203–4 n. 2; stylized narrative mode 226–7, 245, 273. *See also* Byrhtnoth.
Bede 22, 36, 40, 95, 101–2, 122 n. 8, 144–5, 154–7, 163, 251, 303, 306, 309; and Latin language 144; and oral tradition 321–3; as scholar 321, 324; as storyteller 324; 'Vision of Dryhthelm' 323 n. 31; 'Vision of Fursa' 322–3. *See also* Cædmon, Bede's story of; Old English poetry: Bede's 'Death Song'.
Beowulf the hero and king 132; his character 28 n. 38; 'the Goth' 116–17, 126; linked to many tribes 66; '*rex justus*' 33
Beowulf 13–16, 27–71, 87, 92, 100 n. 72, 108, 130, 148–9, 179, 196, 200–1, 257–8, 267, 306; and Bear's Son folktale 34 n. 55, 35 n. 57; Christian character 33, 56, 85 n. 32, 239; critical reception 5, 28 n. 38, 341; and cultural synthesis 56; date 15 n. 5, 28–55, 30 n. 45, 32 n. 47, 75 n. 5, 185 n. 105; and dual perspectives 272; English historical allusions 35–9, 67–71; and ethnogenesis 60–1; genres embedded in 55 n. 101; geography of 126–30, 132–6; ideological functions 49, 55, 56–8, 70, 106; Irish and Celtic elements 341–2; language and rhetoric 32–3, 203; as myth 61–3; Old Norse analogues 34–5; oral-derived 50, 53–5, 181–2; polysemic 14–15; as pseudo-historical source 47–9; sense of past in 33–4,

56, 61–3, 71; social context 15–16; 'Song of Finn and Hengest' 36, 69, 126, 129–30, 148, 199, 343; as text 49–55; and tribes of northern Europe: Danes 31, 56; Frisians 128–30; Jutes 125–30; Goths 116–17; Swedes 131–2, 134–5. *See also* Beowulf the hero and king; Gēatas; Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*.

Byrhtnoth 211–12, 215, 243–52; as charismatic leader 211, 226–7, 228–9, 243; death scene 221–2, 246–8; his laughter 254, 260–3, 269–73, 275–6, 277–8; his piety 262; his recklessness 220, 270, 275; as quasi-sacrificial victim 244, 246–9. *See also Battle of Maldon*.

Cædmon, Bede's story of 28–9, 51, 153–8, 309–11, 313–20, 323–4, 331 n. 13; analogues 310–20, 323; hagiographic features 314–15; historical basis 309–10 n. 3; the name 'Cædmon' 315; as origin myth 29, 157; real-world setting 318; religious tenor 318–20. *See also* Anglo-Latin literature: Bede; Old English poetry: Cædmon's *Hymn*.

Cartography 130–40; Cotton Tiberius *mappa mundi* 121–2, 122 n. 7, 130; Klaeber's map of *Beowulf* 124 n. 10. *See also* Geography.

Church in Anglo-Saxon England: Benedictine reform of 26, 151, 158; Irish influence on 312; secular links 24, 178 n. 90; use of Latin in 144. *See also* Anglo-Saxon England: Christian conversion of, Christian impact on.

Critical approaches to OE literature 8–11; electronic 8–9; exegetical 201; formalist 13; gender-based 9; manuscript-based 10–11; New Critical 8; New Historical 9–10; oral-formulaic 7, 146–7, 195; phenomenological 9; philological 3, 8; postmodern 9; psychological 7–8; through source studies 10; structural 7. *See also* Scholarly approaches and trends.

Deor 63, 92, 108, 113 n. 5, 149, 170–4, 179–80; date 185 n. 105; the name 'Deor' 171; narrative persona 171; refrain 172–3, 189–93

Editing (in principle and practice): hyperconservative 11; of OE prose 6–7; of oral epic poetry 51 n. 95, 53–4

Epic and epic-like poetry: 14–15, 55 n. 101; *Heliand* 271 n. 42, 310; *Kalevala* 52; *Kudrun* 173; *Mwindo Epic* 52; *Nibelungenlied* 86, 196; *Song of Roland* 186, 196, 264 n. 23, 265 n. 26. *See also Beowulf*; Greek literature: Homer, *Odyssey*; Latin literature: *Waltharius*; Old English poetry: *Waldere*.

Ethnogenesis 59–61, 123; creative ethnicity 37, 49, 95, 109

Folklore genres: ballads 268 n. 31; brain-teasers 287–90, 297–8; chapbooks 287 n. 14; childlore 287 n. 15; fairy tales 286, 291; folk legend 317–18; folktales 317–18; 'friend-of-a-friend tale' ('FOAF-tale') 323; Jack tales 291 n. 23; urban legend 323

Gēatas 48–9, 132; and Bede's *Iuti* or *Iutae* 40, 43, 69; and Gautar 39, 41, 69–70 n. 5, 122, 135; and Getae

41–3, 47; and Goths 46, 117, 126; and Jutes 70 n. 5, 124–5, 135; historicity of 65–7; location of 40–1, 47, 131, 132–3, 135, 139; migration to Jutland (disputed) 136; spelling of name 6
Gender (as category) 306
Genealogy 27, 86; pseudo-genealogy of West Saxon kings 23, 32, 165–6
Geography (and pseudo-geography) 39–49, 61, 126, 136; heroic geography 119–36, 137–40; of Hygelac's Rhineland raid 133; North Sea culture zone 18; individual toponyms: Gotland (as OE name for Jutland) 44–5, 132, 138–9; Sillende (as OE name for Zealand) 45, 140; individual tribes: Heathobeards 124, 139; Winedas (Wends) 139–40. *See also Beowulf*: geography of; Cartography; Gēatas: location of; Goths: location of.
Goths 86, 111–18, 121–2; ambiguous character of 71, 92–3; English connections 111–20, 125; Gothicism 92, 113, 116–17; location of (disputed) 43–7, 121–2, 125–6, 132; Scandinavian origins (questioned) 47, 114–15, 137 n. 29; individual Goths: Eormanric (Ermanaric) 27, 75, 88 n. 41, 89–93, 98–9, 138, 173–4, 175, 179; Svanhildr 92; Theodoric the Ostragoth 92, 112, 138, 173–4, 179. *See also Widsith*: depiction of ancient peoples (Goths).
Grammar: evidentials 293; subjunctive mood 290, 291–2, 298; syntactic variation 346–7
Greek literature: Homer 51, 52, 186, 196, 264, 268; *Odyssey* 30 n. 45, 264–5; Plato 270 n. 36, 292
Heaney, Seamus 300–2, 325–53; higher education 330–1; homage to Cædmon 333; and Irish sectarian violence 336, 338; trajectory of career 331–6; translations other than *Beowulf* 328; poetic character: archaeological metaphors 332, 333, 334; middle style 337; OE terms and themes 333–6, 352 n. 58; unusual vocabulary 337; Viking themes 333–4
Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* 325–30, 337–53; audio versions 326 n. 1; compared with R. M. Liuzza's translation 329 n. 10; controversial among Anglo-Saxonists 326, 353; dragon episode 344–50; errors 343 n. 39, 344, 351 n. 54; introduction to 327; Irish dialect terms 338–40; Old Norse terms 342; a 'strong' translation 327, 352; poetic qualities: alliteration 346–7; cosmopolitan style 340; fidelity 327–8; kennings 339–40; preference for verbal constructions 347; sensationalism 342–3, 352; syntactic freedom 346, 348, 350; vatic mode 352
'Heroic Age' 18, 27–8, 40, 46, 63, 76, 87, 137–40, 172, 174, 179–80, 193; individual kings and heroes: Ælfwine (Alboin) 88, 90, 91, 97, 98, 111 n. 1; Ætla (Attila) 86, 89; Finn 27, 175; Geat (eponymous ancestor of Gēatas) 48 n. 88, 112–13 n. 5, 172–3; Guthere (Gunther) 86, 88; Hama 27, 57, 89, 92; Hengest 27, 36–7, 57, 68–9, 95; Hygelac 27, 42, 57, 133; Ingeld 19, 27, 57, 139; Offa of Angeln 27, 37–8, 68, 71, 87–8, 93–4, 95 n. 60, 131, 132; Ongentheow 27; Scyld 31–2, 62–3, 68, 71 n. 6, 98; Sigemund

27, 148; Waldere 57; Weland 27, 33–4, 172, 179; Widia 89, 92; Witta 95–6. *See also Beowulf*: and tribes of northern Europe; Gēatas; Geography: heroic geography; Goths: individual (Eormanric, Theodoric); *Widsith*: depiction of ancient peoples.
Heroic poetry: as discourse 13–14, 57–8, 106; in Balkans 21; in early England 16–19, 27–8; functions of 18–19. *See also* Epic and epic-like poetry; Greek literature: Homer.

Irish literature: Annals of Ulster 300; *immrama* 'voyages' 301; 'Man Who Had No Story' (Irish tale-type 2412B) 303–6, 311–13, 315–25; *Navigatio sancti Brendani* 301 n. 46; pilgrimage *pro amore Dei* 301; traditional storytelling 303 n. 50

Kings (Anglo-Saxon): Æthelred 'The Unready' 159, 204–8, 273; Æthelstan 26, 49, 151; Edgar the Peaceable 151; Offa, King of Mercia 24, 27, 37–8, 55 n. 101, 68, 87–8, 95 n. 60; Wiglaf, King of Mercia, 38. *See also* Alfred the Great.

Latin literature (medieval, classical, biblical): Adam of Bremen 261–2; Ecclesiasticus 257; Gildas 157, 251; Gregory the Great 22, 33, 157; Gregory of Tours 42 n. 77,133 n. 23; Isidore of Seville 43 n. 79, 292 n. 26; Jordanes 47, 115–16, 125; *Liber monstrorum* 42–3, 133 n. 23; Ovid 306 n. 53; Paulus Diaconus (Paul the Deacon) 88 n. 40, 97; *Rule of St Benedict* 257; Tacitus 122–3; *Waltharius* 163 n. 53; William of Ockham 298. *See also* Anglo-Latin literature; Anglo-Norman literature.
Laughter: as culturally specific 255, 259; as gesture 259, 261, 267; as human universal 256–7; and nemesis 271; in ON skaldic poetry 271; opposed by clergy 257; opposed by philosophers 270; in saints' lives 262; and scorn 262, 270–2; as semiotically complex 263; in OE poetry: *Battle of Brunanburh* 271–2; *Battle of Maldon* 254, 258, 260–3, 269–73, 275–6; *Beowulf* 257–8, 272; *Judith* 271–2; *Seafarer* 263
Laws (Anglo-Saxon) 225, 281–5; legal protection 282; oaths 282–3 n. 7; trial by ordeal 282–4
Libraries (Anglo-Saxon) 160, 160–1 n. 45, 178
Literacy: and ideology 15; of laity 15–16, 158, 160 n. 44, 161, 167; in Latin 144; in Latin and the vernacular 4, 161 n. 48, 168; and orality 19–22; in three languages 169; in the vernacular 15–16, 25–7
Logic (symbolic) 288

Manuscripts 7, 8, 10–11, 26–7, 40, 85 n. 33, 89, 169–70, 174, 178, 187; as basis of dating texts 30 n. 45, 151–2 n. 27; as gifts 26; as symbols of authority 55, 83; individual manuscripts:
Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 173 (the Parker Chronicle) 23, 60, 215–16, 223, 241
Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS 3501, fols 8–130 (the Exeter Book) 73, 159, 168–71, 174

London, British Library, MS Additional 47967 (the Tollemache Orosius) 181 n. 94
London, British Library, Cotton MSS, Tiberius B I: 45, 85 n. 33
London, British Library, Cotton MSS, Tiberius B V: 121–2
London, British Library, Cotton MSS, Vespasian A I (the Vespasian Psalter) 183 n. 100
London, British Library, Cotton MSS, Vitellius A XV (the *Beowulf* MS) 7 n. 6, 42–3
London, Lambeth Palace, MS 149 (the Lambeth Bede) 159, 168 n. 67
Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 319: 168 n. 67
Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc 636 (the Peterborough Chronicle) 95 n. 61
Mentality (Anglo-Saxon) 119, 253–6, 285, 286–7; agonistic 84–5; polarized 286–7; theocentric 285
Myth 1, 65, 209, 209–10 n. 18, 210–11, 279–80; as false story 280; as sacred narrative 279; socially embedded 279, 281
Myth of migration 16–17, 40–1, 46, 48, 94–5, 119–20, 150–1

Narrative (traditional) 238; and anti-storytelling prejudice 292, 294; and favorite numbers 226–7, 237–8; as human capability 83, 290, 299–300; myth-like 1, 280–1, 294; stylized 238, 264–8, 286–7; and time 83, 106
Nostalgia 152, 174–80, 183–4, 187; in *Beowulf* 175–6; in *Deor* 174; in *Widsith* 175

Old English literature: and Anglo-Saxon state formation 100; Christian exegesis of 201–2; Christian impact on 22–3; oral basis 181–2; reception in Anglo-Norman period 4–5; themes of treachery in 222–3 n. 46; individual authors, works, and genres: *Burghal Hidage* 100 n. 72, 104; charms 341; charters 37; *Laws of Cnut* 225; OE Bede 40, 41 n. 73, 43, 69, 100 n. 72, 125, 130, 132, 135, 139; OE Boethius 111–12; OE Orosius 43–6, 61, 69, 100 n. 72, 111, 120, 123, 125, 130, 135, 181 n. 16; saints' lives 100 n. 72, 102–3, 262; 'Voyage of Ohthere' 43–6, 120, 138–41, 147–8 n. 16; 'Voyage of Wulfstan' 138, 139; *Wonders of the East* 43, 96 n. 64, 131; Wulfstan the homilist 223 n. 46; his *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* 250–1, 258. *See also* Ælfric; Bede; Anglo-Latin literature; Old English poetry.
Old English poetry 1, 19, 28–30, 102, 106; 151–2 n. 27, 200–3, 251, etc.; afterlife 2; Christian character 16, 29–30, 63, 259; functions 4, 13, 79; Germanic heritage of 16–19, 30, 57, 60–1, 63, 76, 150–2, 201; myth-like character 2; native terms for 105, 183 n. 99; oral residue in 147; patronage of 18; as ritualized discourse 58, 79, 105; syncretic nature 30, 58; individual poems and authors: *Advent Lyrics* 169; *Battle of Brunanburh* 164, 212, 271–2; *Battle of Finnsburh* 19, 100 n. 72, 108, 199–202; Bede's 'Death Song' 144–5; Cædmon's *Hymn* 29, 154 n. 32, 154–5, 155 n. 33, 157, 314; *Chronicle* poems 100 n. 72, 164; Cynewulf 50–1, 169, 182–3

n. 99; *Durham* 321; *Fortunes of Men* 169; *Husband's Message* 169; *Judith* 271–2; *Maxims I* (Exeter Maxims) 86, 184–5; *Maxims II* (Cotton Maxims) 85, 184–5; *Metres of Boethius* 33–4, 112; *Riddles* 168; *Ruin* 169; *Seafarer* 105, 169, 174, 263, 329 n. 9; 341; *Waldere* 19, 92, 108, 200; *Wanderer* 32–3 n. 48, 169, 174, 184, 258, 328–9 n. 9; *Wife's Lament* 105, 169, 258. *See also Battle of Maldon*; *Beowulf*; Cædmon, Bede's story of; *Deor*; *Widsith*.

Old Norse literature: *Atlaqviða* 278 n. 3; *Grettis saga* 34–5; *Hávamál* 271; *Hrólfs saga kraka* 34; *Njál's Saga* 265–7, 332–3; *Orms þáttr Stórolfssonar* 35; *Qrvar-Odds saga* 35, 240; *Samsons saga fagra* 35; Snorri Sturluson 125–6, 133 n. 23, 240

Oral literature 19–20 n. 16; in Africa 155–6; in Balkans 21, 156; in early England 18–19, 29–30, 50–5, 154–8, 182, 182–3 n. 99; in Ireland 303 n. 50, 311–12, 316–18; in Scotland 21–22, 302–7, 320–1; individual collectors: Daniel Biebuyck 52; Zora Neale Hurston 293–4; Bronislaw Malinowski 51; Milman Parry and Albert Lord 21, 146–7, 195; Edward Sapir 52; Cecil Sharp 52, 186; individual tradition-bearers: Willie McPhee 320–1; Avdo Medjedović 21; Belle Stewart 321 n. 25; Michael James Timoney 316–17; Betsy Whyte 302–6; Duncan Williamson 21, 21–2 n. 21. *See also* Oral poet; Orality and textuality.

Oral poet (bard, singer of tales): apprenticeship 156; cult of 167, 186–7; mythology of 150–2, 154, 182–3, 185–7, 199; represented in OE verse 108, 148–9, 168–76; search for 77, 141, 145–6, 147–8, 180, 187; terms for 195–7, 202. *See also* Cædmon, Bede's story of; Oral literature.

Orality and textuality 20–1, 153 n. 31. *See also* Textualization.

Saints (Anglo-Saxon): St Æthelthryth 102; St Cuthbert 142, 143 n. 6, 157; St Edmund 102; St Lawrence 262. *See also* Old English literature: individual authors, works, and genres: saints' lives.

Scholarly approaches and trends 3, 7–11; Anglo-Saxonism 17 n. 8; anthropological criticism 79–80, 107–8; anthropology of the past 79, 83–4; cognitive anthropology and archaeology 254; emotions (history of) 255; gesture (history of) 264 n. 23; literary history (as cultural critique) 58, 109; narrative-centered approaches 294–6; performance theory 81; phenomenological (reader-response) criticism 296, 297 n. 36; philology (medieval vs. modern) 41 n. 74; postmodernism 20 n. 16, 80–2, 294–5; post-processual archaeology 81; psychoanalysis 296; reception history 254. *See also* Critical approaches to OE literature; Semiotics.

Science fiction 299; Jules Verne 299, 302 n. 47

Semiotics: of attendance motif 264–5, 266 n. 27; in British balladry and folk poetry 268 n. 31; of brandishing a spear 267–8; of gesture 264–8; of laughter 255–9, 261–3, 266–7,

270–3; of 'marked' clothing 265–6. *See also* Laughter.
Social or behavioural codes: charismatic leadership 243; chivalry 229, 234, 236; the feud 235 n. 66; heroism 275; sacrifice 244–5

Terms, critical: 'abstract narrative patterns' 323; 'Anglo-Saxons' 39 n. 66; 'competence' (literary or cultural) 53, 268, 269; 'desire for origins' 18, 58, 109, 123; 'distanciation' 108 n. 87; 'ethnopoesis' 123; 'folklore' 289; 'Heroic Age' 18; 'heroic geography' 123; 'heterocosmos' 292; 'language of things and gestures' 263–4; 'lies' 294; 'literature' 77; 'marking' (linguistic) 70; 'migrationism' 59–60; 'oral poetry act' 53, 55; 'secular' 49 n. 90; 'strong tradition-bearer' 20–1, 156–7; 'structures of feeling' 259 n. 11; 'symbolic stories' 280, 294; 'textual community' 53 n. 98, 268 n. 32
Terms for genres: 'epic' 202; 'Germanic legend' 76 n. 9; 'heroic history' 39 n. 67; 'heroic lay' 199–202, 203; 'myth' 279–80. *See also* Folklore genres.
Terms, Old English; *bōt* 'atonement, deliverance' 250–1; *ellen* 'courage, fighting spirit, zeal' 262; *eotenas* 'giants' 126–9; *giedd* 'poetry, heightened discourse' 105–6, 182–3 n. 99; *Hreðgotan* 126, 137 n. 29; *mōd* 'mind, spirit, courage' 263 n. 21; *mundbyrd* 'protection, patronage' 282 n. 4; *ofermōd* 'surplus of pride' 221, 262–3, 270, 275; *ordāl* 'ordeal' 282–3 n. 6
Textualization 28, 49–55; ethnopoetics 51 n. 95; oral dictation 51–5, 181. *See also* Editing; Oral Literature; Writing.
Truth in storytelling 279–81, 286–7, 291, 298; invention of fictionality 292 n. 25; rhetoric of lies 291; 'truth in lies' 294, 300–6, 303 n. 50

Widsith 73–109, 126, 131, 149, 172, 179 n. 92; and *Beowulf* 75; Christian framework 101; date 32–3 n. 48, 77–8 n. 13, 185 n. 105; English bias 86–8, 91–2, 94–9; first-person voice 103 n. 79; handling of time 104; ideological functions 70–1, 77–8, 83, 86, 95, 106; manuscript text 73–4; and mythopoesis 84, 99; persona of speaker 95–6, 170–1, 175; as 'primitive poetry' (contested) 76; rhetorically sophisticated 104–5; and 'Scilling' 175 n. 85; use of superlatives 105 n. 81; depiction of ancient peoples: Danes 87–8, 98–9; Goths 86, 88–93, 97–9, 121; Huns 86, 89, 122; Lombards 97–9; Myrgings 93–5; Picts and Scots 86, 99
Writing: bilingualism 167; and loss of personal presence 102, 108, 152–3 n. 31; mythology of 149–50 n. 23; power of 157–8; and state-formation 100, 103–4

Studies in the Early Middle Ages

All volumes in this series are evaluated by an Editorial Board, strictly on academic grounds, based on reports prepared by referees who have been commissioned by virtue of their specialism in the appropriate field. The Board ensures that the screening is done independently and without conflicts of interest. The definitive texts supplied by authors are also subject to review by the Board before being approved for publication. Further, the volumes are copyedited to conform to the publisher's stylebook and to the best international academic standards in the field.

Titles in Series

Cultures in Contact: Scandinavian Settlement in England in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries, ed. by D. Hadley and J. Richards (2000)

On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages, ed. by Andrew Gillett (2002)

Matthew Townend, *Language and History in Viking Age England: Linguistic Relations between Speakers of Old Norse and Old English* (2002)

Contact, Continuity, and Collapse: The Norse Colonization of the North Atlantic, ed. by J. H. Barrett (2003)

Court Culture in the Early Middle Ages: The Proceedings of the First Alcuin Conference, ed. by C. Cubitt (2003)

Political Assemblies in the Earlier Middle Ages, ed. by P. S. Barnwell and M. Mostert (2003)

Wulfstan, Archbishop of York: The Proceedings of the Second Alcuin Conference, ed. by Matthew Townend (2004)

Borders, Barriers, and Ethnogenesis: Frontiers in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, ed. by Florin Curta (2006)

John D. Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems and the Play of the Texts* (2006)

Teaching and Learning in Northern Europe, 1000–1200, ed. by Sally N. Vaughn and Jay Rubenstein (2006)

Narrative and History in the Early Medieval West, ed. by Elizabeth M. Tyler and Ross Balzaretti (2006)

In Preparation

People and Space in the Middle Ages, 300–1300, ed. by Wendy Davies, Guy Halsall, Andrew Reynolds

The Crisis of the Oikoumene*: The Three Chapters and the Failed Quest for Unity in the Sixth-Century Mediterranean*, ed. by Celia Chazelle and Catherine Cubitt